

UPDATED: Council green lights 3.75% tax hike ahead of March approval

(Note: This story corrects a misquote which appearing in an earlier edition. A similar correction will appear in the March 6 edition of The Auroran)

By Brock Weir

Council wrapped up their budget deliberations this week landing on a proposed municipal tax increase of 3.75 per cent.

If given final approval at a Council meeting next month, Aurora residents can expect to pay an extra \$13.24 in property taxes in the year ahead, or an additional \$53.96 for the average Aurora property assessed at \$400,000.

Combined with a tax increase from the Region of York, as well as taxes for education, this will result in an overall 1.99 per cent impact on your tax bill.

Councillors went into Monday's meeting facing a 4.02 per cent proposed increase which was floated at the start of the month after a 42 per cent spike in insurance premiums at the Town. In the intervening weeks, however, municipal staff whittled this down through various cost-saving measures and use of reserve funds.

Addressing a \$195,000 increase stemming from increased costs for insurance and benefits, Town Treasurer Dan Elliott said and his staff looked internally to bring numbers back down to what was originally forecasted.

\$100,000 in savings, he said, could be attributed to a job shuffle at Town Hall where the duties and responsibilities of the Department of Customer and Legislative Services was rolled into the department of the Town Solicitor. A proposed conversion from a part-time position in Aurora's Special Events department to full time was delayed until June, as well as a rejigging of money going into Council's contingency fund for special projects and initiatives.

"It is a short year," said Mr. Elliott regarding 2014 being an election year, noting Council would probably be dipping into that pot less. "We also think it is appropriate to draw from the [tax rate] stabilization reserve the premium from the old benefits over the new benefits for the first quarter of this year, which is \$36,000. Between the seven [directors], we will each look into our budgets and challenge each other, and we will find the other \$22,000. With these adjustments in hand, that will result in your 1.99 per cent."

Monday's discussions, as they had at the last budget meeting near the start of the month, focused on a \$70,000 grant for 2014 to the Aurora Historical Society (AHS).

At the last session, the majority of Council agreed they would fund the \$10,000 increase to the group this year, but serious discussions would need to take place in the year ahead on a business model and blueprint before any further funding would be forthcoming.

This was a refrain echoed by resident Christopher Watts, a long-time critic of the AHS, who delegated to the meeting. The AHS, he argued, has been "dead", and this Council has, over the past four years, "merely reanimated its corpse," rewarding "poor performance."

"I don't buy the sentiment that there is bad faith on behalf of the municipality in not fully carting out the extent of this fund," said Mr. Watts. "I don't think there is any lack of confidence in the Town. I am finding, as a resident, a complete lack of confidence in what the AHS is capable of."

Going forward, he suggested the Canadian Conservation Institute should be approached to assess Hillary House before any further funds are handed over "for any work to be done" at the site.

Some Councillors said they were intrigued by the idea. Councillor Evelyn Buck, for instance, said there was merit in the idea as the

traditional grant to the AHS was for the Aurora Museum and collection, both of which are now presently in the hands of the Town. Citing Hillary House, and the ongoing management of the Aurora Cultural Centre, she added "Council has no authority from the community, no consensus they are willing to bear the burden for this second old building."

"They have done everything they can and they are doing different things, but at the same time we have that fiduciary responsibility [to have that discussion]," said Councillor Michael Thompson.

Added Councillor Sandra Humfries: "[The AHS] came with somewhat of a plan last year. It didn't work very well. They were going to regroup and they took some initiatives and that did not go well. They have had to reduce their staff. It's all done part-time and I heard it loud and clear that they need some help. Hopefully they will come back and have a plan."