Council looks at ways to engage residents in Budget process

It's a municipal decision that directly impacts your bottom line, but is there a lack of interest in the municipal budget process?

That was the question Councillors considered last week after a public meeting for residents to provide input on the Town's 2023 Capital and Operating Budgets attracted zero participants.

Councillors met in Council Chambers on Tuesday, June 7, for the public meeting ? which, due to lack of input, lasted less than three minutes.

This year will see the introduction of a new multi-year budget cycle, which will set budget targets -- including tax increases ? for the next four years, years which are expected to include significant inflation.

?Over the past year and a half, the Town's goods and service prices have been subject to significant inflationary pressure as a result of the pandemic and war in Ukraine,? said Jason Gaertner, Manager of Financial Management for the Town of Aurora, in a report to Council. ?Overall, inflation for all goods and services has averaged around 5 ? 6 per cent. More specifically, the Town's typical basket of goods and services has been subject to higher inflationary pressures.?

Costs related to Parks have seen a rise of approximately 31 per cent, while Roads costs have increased by 29 per cent. Increases are also being reported in the areas of facilities, water, wastewater and stormwater services, and IT services.

?Recently, the Town has experienced price increases higher than these amounts for some individual awards,? Mr. Gaertner continued. ?In many instances, capital project contract awards are coming in higher than available project capital budget authority. This could lead to requests from staff in 2022 seeking additional capital budget authority to award contracts for active capital projects.

?These recently experienced inflationary price increases will not go away. Rather, the Town's average cost for these items will have increased for the long-term and be subject to further inflationary pressures. The recent Provincial and Federal budgets project that inflation will return to a more normal pace by 2024, aligning with the Bank of Canada's overall inflationary target of 2 per cent. The proposed 2023 budget to be presented to Council in December will reflect this increased cost of doing business.?

Despite the anticipated increased costs coming down this fall, no members of the public took part in the first public session, leading Councillor John Gallo to question what the Town could do to increase public engagement, including holding more public sessions.

?I don't want to repeat what we just did because there doesn't seem to be too much value if we can't get engagement from the public, but I think it is the only public meeting on our calendar,? he said. ?That's not stopping the public from coming to a meeting and expressing their opinion [but] I will leave it out there if anyone (on Council) sees any value in another one later on in the process.?

Carley Smith, Aurora's Manager of Corporate Communications, said residents had provided ?quite a bit? of feedback through the Town's Engage Aurora online platform, while, through the same channel, a survey has been launched with an incentive for residents to provide their thoughts.

But Council agreed that more should be done.

?We should continue to look at ways to drive engagement and hope for as much participation as possible into the budget process,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?I would challenge Ms. Smith to come up with some other ideas or thoughts along those avenues to increase participation.?

Added Councillor Wendy Gaertner: ?There is certainly a significant number of people in Town who do not do ?online' and are not

into social media, especially perhaps the older generation. I think it would be a good idea to at least have the opportunity to [engage]?and I would like to make sure there is some?opportunity if someone does want to come to the Council chamber to speak with us.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter