

Council motion raises questions on service levels during budget process

A motion from Councillor John Gallo to pause certain new hires at Town Hall last week sparked a debate around existing municipal service levels as lawmakers prepared to sign off on the Town's 2021 Budget.

Removing all tax-base funded new full time equivalent (FTE) positions was put forward by the Councillor, a move he said could save up to 1 per cent of tax pressure.

It is time, he said, for Council to 're-assess' all positions for the year ahead to determine whether or not they are needed.

'I realize the impact just gets pushed down the line, but my view would be to have a full business plan on each one of these positions in 2022 to really understand whether they are necessary at this time,' he said. 'I have always been an advocate of much more detail and a full business plan to justify the new hires.'

CAO Doug Nadorozny and department directors, however, made their case for the new positions, arguing that some departments are short-staffed and new positions are needed to maintain current service levels for residents. In some short-staffed departments, calls are getting abandoned or dropped, and, as the Town grows, these positions will support increased demand, they said.

Mr. Nadorozny also noted that the positions in question amount of \$12 on the average residential tax bill.

Councillor Gallo's motion was supported by Councillor Rachel Gilliland who said as businesses and organizations are tightening their belts amid the ongoing uncertainty stemming from COVID-19 the Town needs to do the same.

'When we talk about the pressures we have on us, I want to reflect on the pressures that residents have just to put food on the table right now,' she said. 'I am just looking at this situation this year and this is half-a-per cent that we can save on our tax levy for 2021. This is huge. Thankfully right now we're at 1.96 per cent based on some further reductions, but we can actually save another .5 per cent with the others by putting it on hold. For six or seven months, we can definitely barrel through.'

'I don't think the residents of Aurora are going to be upset if our service levels weren't up to 110 per cent standard during the 2020-2021 year. I believe the residents are asking us to please give us some more relief and if there's ever a time to think about putting a moratorium on some part of the hiring and we can pause and we can do it, now is the time. We all have to pull up our socks and we all have to work a little bit harder.'

But the majority of Council had a different viewpoint.

Councillor Harold Kim, for instance, said it was too early to tell whether or not the positions were needed and said he trusted Mr. Nadorozny's judgement. Not going forward with these positions could 'tie' staff's hands and jeopardize programs and services that are ongoing, he added.

'Staff gave me a convincing argument there, and so short of me saying that I don't believe them, I have to believe them I think also that we already know that our population is increasing, probably by about 1,000 or more people every year and if population is increasing, how can we keep up with our service levels with the same amount of staff?' he said. 'My rationale is that each year there has to be some slight increase in staff to ensure that our service levels are met.'

Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she saw the merits in both perspectives, but ultimately decided maintaining service levels were paramount.

'As much as they (residents) would like to have a decrease in their tax bill? at the end of the day, if they are coming to the Town and they need the help, they want us to be there,' said Councillor Gaertner.

Added Councillor Michael Thompson: ?In this time of COVID, we need to find the balance between fiscal responsibility and meeting the needs of the community. They have a certain expectation when it comes to service levels and I don't want to necessarily see that impacted just to save that \$12. That is the balance.?

Councillor Gilliland, however, reiterated her support for the motion.

?It makes it sound like if we don't hire these eight people, the whole Town is going to crumble and come to a halt and we're not going to be able to answer phone calls,? she contended. ?It doesn't all hinge on answering a phone call. I certainly haven't had one resident complain to me at all that they haven't had trouble reaching Town Staff. I have had increased emails through COVID and support, but have always been able to answer the calls for the residents and [been] able to support their inquiries and needs.

?What are we doing? I am sure there are definitely some positions that are in need, but, seriously, is the Town going to shut down and crumble because we don't have these positions? I think we can manage. Other corporations are restructuring, revisiting their plan, reassessing positions, maybe someone is picking up the slack somewhere else or being shuffled around, everybody is doing cuts and I just think it would be responsible for us to look at it that way.?

Mayor Tom Mrakas offered a different perspective, stating the Town has made cuts due to COVID-19 and is looking at the potential of doing so once again during this second wave of the virus.

?I would like to remind Council and everyone watching that we let go of 280 people when this pandemic first hit and currently because of the lockdown again we're having discussions about possibly letting go more people,? he said. ?To say that we have not made any cuts and that we need to make cuts, we have made cuts and that hurts to make that decision. That decision is on me and the CAO. We have made those hard decisions and people have lost their jobs.?

The motion failed on a vote of 5 ? 2 with Councillors Gallo and Gilliland voting in favour.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter