

Council targets 3.95% tax increase

By Brock Weir

Service levels could take a hit this year as Council targets a 3.95 per cent residential tax increase.

Council has scrapped going line by line through the budget to find cuts to bring down this year's proposed residential tax increase, instead approving a target of 3.95 per cent and tasking municipal staff with figuring out what to cut to make a 'more palatable' number a reality.

Sitting in a Special General Committee meeting on Monday night, Council scrubbed a decision made the previous week to cut the training and development budget for municipal staff by \$100,000 and the budget for printing and advertising by \$30,000. A better way forward, suggested Aurora CAO Neil Garbe, was for Council to set a budget target and task staff with figuring out how to meet it.

Ultimately, Council voted 4 ? 3 in favour of a suggestion from Councillor Harold Kim to trim the 2015 Municipal Budget by \$300,000 while carrying forward with a previously approved initiative of looking to boost municipal revenue by a further \$100,000. Councillors Sandra Humfries and Tom Mrakas were not at the meeting.

'There seems to be some agreement around the table that further reductions need to happen with the budget to make it reasonable for the residents here in Aurora,' said Councillor Thompson. 'The question is where should they come from and where is best. I am open to looking at alternative ideas instead of what was previously suggested.'

Council, he suggested, will need more time to digest where these potential cuts will be made before April 7, when the budget was set to be finalized by Council. This approval, however, is expected to be delayed this week.

'I want to make sure staff and Council are in alignment where the cuts are coming from, if cuts [are] directly related to service levels that have a direct impact to residents, as opposed to some of the other cuts that have been proposed that are more internal, that is a significant discussion,' Councillor Thompson added. 'It would be nice to have that prior to the budget being approved to have a sense where they are coming from.'

This uncertainty also gave pause for Mayor Geoff Dawe. While he said he was in favour of giving Mr. Garbe either a percentage or a dollar figure to work with, it was important to understand the ramifications first.

'I learned a great term [at a recent conference for my position on the board of Southlake Regional Health Centre] which is NIFO ? Nose In, Fingers Out,' he said. 'We know what is going on, but we don't get in there with our fingers. That is how I would prefer to work. Others have different preferences and that's fine. We have to make a decision how we want to direct. It is very difficult from staff's point of view to ping-pong back and forth. We can't sit here and continue to pick the budget apart and go back and forth.'

'I will not support this because, in my opinion, we're making a decision on something we have absolutely no idea what the ramifications are. We have no idea. I don't think that is good planning.'

A similar view was offered by Councillor John Abel, who shared Councillor Thompson's view the budget process needs a significant overhaul. The Town of Newmarket, for example, gave their staff a target figure for their budget back in December. Now Aurora is poised to follow suit, nearly four months later. The status quo of the budget process has created its own problems here at home, said Councillor Abel.

'It has put us in this situation where, in my mind, I don't think we really belong ? in the day-to-day management of staff,' he said. 'We have to work with our staff. [Although we bring a lot to the table] they are experts in every field.'

?You invest in your personnel and you get results and it pays long-term. I am passionate about our staff, our Town and our community. I don't want to see us cannibalizing ourselves because of the pressures we have. We should respect and work with our staff.?

If Council approves a 3.95 per cent residential tax increase this month, this translates to an annual increase of \$68.76 on the municipal portion of your tax bill for an average home assessed at \$500,000. Accounting for an increase in taxes from the Region of York, this turns into an overall tax increase of 2.7%, or \$130.65.