

Fire on Council's minds as tax hike currently stands at 5.66%

By Brock Weir

Aurora's proposed residential tax increase now stands at 5.66 per cent, following the beginning of discussions on the Town's operating budget.

Council kicked off deliberations of the 2015 Operating Budget, the portion of the municipal budget that has the largest impact on tax rates, on Monday morning. Going into Monday's meeting, Council was facing a 6.1 per cent tax hike as a larger-than-anticipated budget request from the Central York Fire Services (CYFS) – the fire department serving Aurora and Newmarket – pushed things well beyond the initial tax increase forecasted at 4.96 per cent.

The slight reduction from 6.1 per cent on the municipal portion of your tax bill to 5.66 per cent came after staff from both municipalities met, looking for ways to shave administrative dollars off the fire budget and strategize how requests from the department can be financed best over the next several years.

“The issues in fire are related to the implementation of a Draft Fire Master Services Plan that causes an awful lot of funding pressure for them,” said Town Treasurer Dan Elliott at this week's meeting. “[Key in that] is the need for a new fire station serving the central district of Newmarket and Aurora. Because of the growth in the community, that is where the pressure is for increased fire services to maintain our service level.”

The Draft Master Fire Plan calls for a new fire station near the border of both towns, but consultants retained by the CYFS to draft the plan have earmarked a location near Yonge Street and St. John's Sideroad as the ideal.

“Since then, the administrative staff from both of our municipalities have met and we're going to be proposing [to the Joint Council Committee] for their next meeting a revised draft budget that reduces 6.1 per cent down to 5.66 for us,” said Mr. Elliott, noting future tasks include working on smoothing out these costs over the next five years, calling on Aurora's tax rate stabilization reserves.

The use of tax rate stabilization reserves raised some questions among Council, who wanted to ensure this would be the best way forward. Councillor Michael Thompson, for instance, said much of the funds currently in that account were in place to help the municipality wean itself off things like supplementary taxes.

“It seems like we're now placing a lot of pressure on the stabilization reserve to not only smooth out fire, but smooth out our supplementary taxes as well,” said Councillor Michael Thompson.

The pressure on this account to buffer supplementary taxes is now over, countered Mr. Elliott, adding his department was now anticipating a surplus in this regard.

“The strategy on fire will draw on stabilization, but to what extent will depend on how the JCC (Joint Council Committee) funds the Fire Chief and how they implement the fire master plan and the timing with which they do that. If they put in the new crew early, we'll probably be drawing more heavily onto it. Our strategy is simply to pass that onto the taxpayer evenly over time.”

According to Aurora CAO Neil Garbe, who participated in talks that whittled down the fire costs, discussions included allocating a revenue stream for the fire pressure and fitting the fire department into that stream.

“Our thinking is there might be one year where salaries and benefits are marginally higher, marginally lower the next year, so we're trying to give a steady stream of money and fit that spending into that envelope,” he said. “It is a bit iterative on that account, so hopefully by the time JCC sees it we will be able to figure out exactly what the over/under is on some of those years.”

As discussions around the fire budget continued, for Councillor Wendy Gaertner, it was important to strike that right balance

between finances as well as health and safety concerns.

‘Where is our responsibility as a Council to our residents with respect to providing them appropriate protection?’ she wondered. ‘It is something we need to look at because we’re talking about health and safety spending and we’re talking about tax pressure. We have a responsibility to our residents and our new residents. I don’t know how we can put those two together to accomplish both purposes.’

Monday’s session provided an opportunity for residents to sound off on how they would like to see their dollars spent – or not spent, as the case might be.

Long-time trails advocate Klaus Wehrenberg was on hand to encourage Council to include provisions to ensure trails in any opportunities arising from the development of the Highland Gate Golf Course into a residential development, while Mr. Elliott outlined two written submissions received from the public.

The first was a ‘lengthy’ one asking the Town to implement a ‘responsible pet ownership program’ for Aurora, that would include signs in municipal parks, boosts in animal licensing, and programs for fostering responsible pet ownership.

A further email spoke against tax increases larger than the current rate of inflation.

‘He suggested that now is time for Council in budget to start cutting services and making the hard decisions necessary to keep those budget increases at the current rate of inflation,’ said Mr. Elliott.

Budget deliberations continue next Monday, March 2 at 7 p.m., with budget presentations scheduled from the Aurora Public Library Board, the Aurora Historical Society, and the Aurora Cultural Centre Board, at 7 p.m. Further talks are earmarked for the same time the following Monday. All deliberations take place in Council Chambers.