

Mayor aims for 'balanced' budget approach after Councillors vote for 0% tax increase

Mayor Tom Mrakas told Councillors he would take a 'balanced' approach to presenting Aurora's 2026 Budget this fall after lawmakers formally voted in favour aiming for a 0% tax increase for the year ahead last week.

Council, on a vote of 4 ? 3 on June 24, formally signed off on a motion brought forward by Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo calling on the Mayor to draft next year's budget with a one-year-only tax break for residents.

Voting against the motion were Mayor Mrakas, Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson, and Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim.

While the majority of Council voiced their position through the vote, under Strong Mayor Powers granted to communities like Aurora by the Provincial Government, drafting and presenting the Budget is now under the purview of the Mayor.

Speaking to his motion last week, Councillor Gallo said he was bringing it forward with 'a clear and focused objective to deliver a 0% tax increase in 2026' without compromising service levels or our long-term fiscal sustainability.

'Aurora residents are feeling the ongoing effect of inflation, high-interest rates, and rising household costs,' said Councillor Gallo. 'As a municipality we have an obligation to demonstrate resistance and empathy during these challenging times. This motion charts a responsible course that balances affordability for residents and continued investment in our Town's future. The foundation of this approach lies in the strength of our tax rate stabilization reserve, which currently holds a balance of \$6.4 million. My motion proposes using a small portion, approximately \$630,000, to fund the 1% fiscal strategy contribution that typically goes forward towards our capital reserves. This allows us to maintain our infrastructure commitments without raising taxes in 2026.

'Let me be clear: the use of this reserve is targeted, temporary, and well within our financial means. The remaining reserve balance remains strong, and any impact on future years will be minimal, especially as we direct staff to explore a comprehensive set of cost containments and efficiency strategies. This includes freezing non-essential hiring, delaying low-priority capital projects, identifying grant opportunities, and reviewing our service levels for efficiencies, all while keeping service levels intact for our residents. This motion also calls for meaningful public engagement so that residents have a voice in shaping our budget that reflects the needs and priorities.

'In summary, this is a prudent, compassionate, and forward-thinking budget approach, one that keeps services strong, puts residents first, and protects our financial health. I respectfully ask for Council's support, and the Mayor send a strong message to the residents of Aurora that he is paying attention, he cares, and is prepared to move forward with a 0% tax increase for 2026.'

Mayor Mrakas, however, said that he 'always listens to residents' and will, alongside staff, 'look for every efficiency we possibly can to make sure that we deliver the best possible budget and continue to provide the best possible service at the best possible price.'

'That is our obligation to the residents of the community, and we've been doing that for a very long time,' he said. 'This is why we take a balanced approach to it, and I will not harm the future of our community for something that many economists call fiscally irresponsible.'

Indeed, these views were shared by Councillors Thompson and Kim, with the Ward 4 representative questioning Town Treasurer Rachel Wainwright-van Kessel whether a 0% tax increase in 2026 would put Aurora behind the financial eight-ball in 2027 and going forward.

'If we do a one-time draw from the tax stabilization reserve for \$630,000 that would be used for 2025, we would need to catch up on that for the remaining nine years of the 10-year plan,' she said, referring to Aurora's 10-Year Budget Forecast. 'It would be somewhere around \$5.7 million that we would lose in capital funding for tax-funded projects, unless we replace that in the future

with higher tax increases.?

This figure of \$5.7 million was ?not minimal,? Councillor Thompson contended.

But Councillors who ultimately voted in favour of the motion said they believed Mayor and Staff could accomplish its objectives with minimal impact.

?I have great expectations that the leadership team are capable of being able to do this work,? said Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese. ?We've looked at the last budget, we look at where trimming is possible, and I am in favour of it ? and I think it's the right thing to do for an empathetic and quality community.?

By Brock Weir