

Municipal taxes for average homeowners set to rise \$32

By Brock Weir

The average Aurora homeowner can expect to pay an additional \$31.02 on their property tax bill for 2016 as Council begins talks over the Operating Budget.

This 'average' is an area home assessed at \$500,000. If your property falls on either side of this average, however, you can expect a hike of \$6.20 for every \$100,000 of assessment value on the municipal portion of your tax bill.

With an anticipated tax increase coming from the Region of York, and no increase on the education portion of your tax bill on the horizon, property owners can expect a combined tax increase of 1.88 per cent.

At least, for now.

Councillors began deliberations on the Operating Budget, the portion of the annual budget that has the most direct impact on your tax bill, on Monday night.

This year, however, Council is tackling the budget in what is hoped to be a more direct and efficient manner, having set a tax increase target of 1.8 per cent and tasking Town Hall staff with making it happen. The result, according to staff, is Aurora's lowest proposed tax increase since 2003.

'The proposed budget contains the resources necessary to deliver on Council's plans and priorities for 2016, all at the target given to us by way of a modest increase of 1.8 per cent over the 2015 budget,' said Patrick Moyle, Aurora's interim CAO. 'This proposed amount matches the lowest increase following the collapse of the markets in 2008 and the lowest tax increase in the last 13 years.'

Much of the kudos, he said, can be directed towards the Town's Finance Advisory Committee who have worked to streamline the budget process and make it easier for the general public to participate in and understand.

It takes into account developing a 10-year capital investment plan to get a better handle on expenses and projects that will need to be tackled and budgeted for on the horizon, anticipate future growth over the next decade, and a new bylaw governing Development Charges (fees paid by incoming property developers to account for future demands on municipal resources) 'to ensure growth for the most part pays for growth,' said Mr. Moyle.

Council setting a target was 'exceedingly helpful' in directing municipal directors in developing their budgets, he added, noting they worked very hard to meet a 'challenging yet realistic' target that was also a balanced budget aimed at maintaining and improving service levels wherever possible, reducing Aurora's reliance on interest from the Hydro Reserves as a buffer for the tax rate, and making staff use their resources more efficiently.

'The cost of human resources is a significant part of the operating budget,' said Mr. Moyle. 'Adding to the full-time staff complement obviously increases the costs and, in my view, should always be viewed as a last resort.'

The staff complement at Town Hall is not the biggest impact hitting this year's budget. 30 per cent of this year's plan can be attributed to infrastructure, while 1.3 per cent of the tax hike (or 25 per cent of the overall operating budget, or \$10 million) can be attributed to growth at Central York Fire Services, the fire department governed jointly by Aurora and Newmarket.

A further 1 per cent of the tax pressure comes from contributions to capital reserves, 2.4 per cent for 'other changes', and half a per cent from reducing money skimmed off Hydro interest. This might come to an overall tax pressure of 5.2 per cent, but this is knocked back to 1.8 taking into account a 3.4 per cent rise in taxes from new growth within Aurora.

'This is not a tax increase, it is called a 'tax expansion' because there are more people paying the same amount of tax as the prior year,' said Town Treasurer Dan Elliott.

As Council set the target, they were, of course, pleased overall with the numbers presented to them this week. While Councillor Wendy Gaertner questioned the statement that 'growth pays for itself' as it doesn't quite hit the 100 per cent mark and Councillor Paul Pirri noted there is still a bit of wiggle room on the final number, others said this was the right budget for today.

'This is the sort of budget we needed and with Mr. Moyle it has come,' said Councillor John Abel. 'It is a combination of what we were trying to do and then effectively doing it this year.'

Added Councillor Tom Mrakas: 'I think staff did a great job; we set a target, they met the target, the staff levels are maintained or better. We have held the line on new hires, instituted a vacancy control program to look for efficiencies and I think it puts us in a great position today and for the future.'

Budget talks continue on Monday, November 16, at 5 p.m. with presentations from the Aurora Public Library, Aurora Cultural Centre and Aurora Historical Society. The session takes place in Council chambers and members of the public are encouraged to attend and provide input.