

Residents can expect 3.8% municipal tax increase in 2024

Aurora residents can expect to see a 3.8 per cent increase on the municipal portion of their tax bill in the year ahead.

Council formally adopted the 2024 Budget last week, one which will translate into a \$92.15 increase for a home assessed at \$800,000.

In a statement following the December 19 Council meeting, Mayor Tom Mrakas said he was 'proud' of the Budget as it 'responded to the needs of the community' both today and tomorrow.

'It responds to the needs of the community and makes investments in our future while not overburdening residents and businesses who have seen their own costs go up, from groceries, to gas, to mortgage payments,' he said. 'The moderate increase to your tax bill is about the same as the overall inflation rate in 2023 and allows the Town to push ahead on key priorities that matter to residents, including rehabilitating and maintaining our roads and sidewalks, strengthening our world-class recreation programs, parks and natural spaces, as well as enhancing our arts and culture offerings.'

'Your tax dollars are also working to support Town partners that provide important and essential services to the community, including Central York Fire Services, the Aurora Public Library, and the Aurora Cultural Centre. I thank residents, business owners, staff, partners and, of course, my Council colleagues for working collaboratively on the budget to ensure it works in the best interests of all Aurorans.'

The 3.8 per cent increase breaks down to a 2.8 per cent increase for municipal services and initiatives, with an additional 1 per cent allocated for capital infrastructure projects 'including Aurora Town Square.'

Key investments outlined by the Town include road reconstruction and rehabilitation on Poplar Crescent, Avondale Crescent, Centre Street, and Earl Stewart Drive; the ongoing construction of the 7,500 square foot gymnasium at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex, playground replacements at Fleury Park, Evans Park and Town Park, and the construction of a second artificial turf field at Sheppard's Bush.

'Operating spending in 2024 amounts to a total of \$118.6 million, which is supported by both property taxes and user rates (water, wastewater, and stormwater),' the Town added. 'The Town's 10-year Capital Plan (2024 to 2033) amounts to a total of \$304.2 million, with \$65.4m set aside in 2024. The 2024 to 2026 Budget includes tax increases of 3.5 per cent in 2025 and 2.9 per cent in 2026.'

This year's Budget process was significantly different from years past with the introduction of Strong Mayor powers in several communities across Ontario, including Aurora.

Now, the Budget is presented to Council by the Mayor with the Ward Councillors able to suggest amendments, which may or may not be vetoed by the Head of Council.

This led to some fraught debates among lawmakers as Mayor Mrakas declined to put into the Budget the salary increases Council approved for themselves on a 4 ? 3 vote earlier this fall. Mayoral vetoes on the budget nixed reducing funding for the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame and delaying some hires for the operation of Aurora Town Square.

This staffing matter related to Town Square was a hot-button topic at the last Council meeting of 2023, with Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland bringing forward a motion calling on Council to override the veto, which needs a vote of two-thirds of members.

'I think the question was there were five staff who were being requested to be hired and that Town Square was expected to have a delayed spring opening,' said Councillor Gilliland, who added she discussed it with the Director in question who said a delay was

okay. ?We already do have five full-time staff for Town Square, one of them being Customer Service, and through my amendment it was really just to have transparency and accountability.?

Opposing the motion for a veto override was Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson who said municipal CAO Doug Nadorozny and his team ?have used good judgement? thus far when it comes to hires and he trusted their judgement here.

?To me, the motion borders on micromanaging of staff and I am not supportive of that,? said Councillor Thompson. ?I think that as long as staff continue to exercise good judgement, we should trust our staff.?

Mayor Mrakas was of a similar viewpoint, stating he did not want to ?handcuff staff? on their hiring processes.

?They have the ability to look at this and if there needs to be a delay in the hirings they can make that decision,? he said. ?I trust our expert staff in making that evaluation. They have shown time and time again that they can make that evaluation, but if we need to hire earlier?and they can't, that does undermine the possibility of the successes of the opening of the biggest investment we have made in our community.?

Although she described Town Square as ?the white elephant project in the community,? Councillor Gilliland said she thought ?Town Square is going to do just fine? if the motion to delay the hires was passed. With anticipated operations increasing to \$1.2 million per year, up from \$720,000, she said doing so could save ?at least a minimum of \$40,000 on average per month on extra staff.?

?This is an area where we can at least set a tone,? she contended. ?That's really what I am trying to achieve here and I don't see that there is any issue?. The reality is everybody is okay with that. I don't know why we need to be voting against something that is so obviously not going to be something that is going to contribute to the failure of Aurora Town Square.?

While the motion received a majority of votes ? 4 ? 3, with Mayor Tom Mrakas, Councillor Thompson, and Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim in the contrary ? it did not meet the two-thirds majority threshold in order to pass.

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