

Tax hike stands at 3.44% as budget talks continue

By Brock Weir

Aurora's potential 2014 tax increase sits this week at 3.44 per cent after two days of budget talks.

Deliberations kicked off Saturday, tackling a forecasted 3.77 tax increase, which was later whittled down to 3.38 per cent over the weekend after deleting two items from the municipal infrastructure budget. Further investigation, however, sent this number back up slightly to 3.44 per cent stemming from part-time salary costs for operations at the Aurora Seniors' Centre, and an increase in postal rates expected from Canada Post.

With a projected 1.54 per cent increase in taxes from the Region of York, this 3.44 per cent tax increase on the municipal portion of your tax bill will translate into a combined residential hike of 1.88 per cent.

Aurora's taxes breaks down into an annual increase of \$12.15 for each \$100,000 of assessment on a residential property, or \$18.84 overall when combined with the Region. The household with an average property assessed at roughly \$400,000 can expect to pay in the neighbourhood of \$75.36 extra for the year.

According to the report from Mr. Garbe and Mr. Elliott, factors contributing the tax burden this year include the budget for the Central York Fire Services, which accounts for 1.13 per cent of operating budget increase, and a jump in salaries and benefits for municipal employees, which accounts for 1.80 per cent of the tax hike.

Additional factors include increased contribution to capital reserves, a 3.34 per cent increase in the Aurora Public Library's budget, but a 1.63 per cent relief to tax pressures due to growth.

Fire, however, remains the biggest issue.

Further discussions on Monday included debates over revenue shortfalls stemming from the year-long closure of the Aurora Family Leisure Complex which is undergoing extensive renovations, the cost of online registration for e-Play users, and potential increases to Aurora's communications budget, the latter topic of which was deferred for further debate next week.

Looking ahead, Aurora faces significant challenges for the future, including a transition from a suburban community to a more urban town, according to Mr. Garbe. As Aurora marches towards build-out with the development of the 2C subdivision as well as future building on Leslie Street employment lands, redevelopment and intensification, rather than new development, is going to be key and, with that, comes a shift in development charges currently enjoyed by the Town.

"The wave is coming in 2C," said Mr. Garbe of development funds flowing into Town coffers. "Over the next six or seven years, that wave will dissipate and we will begin to realise the dynamic place our Downtown is becoming."

Al Downey, Director of Parks and Recreation said although there are a number of achievements in his department, including the success of camp programs, the closure of the AFLC has had a \$672,000 impact on the budget, a gap which will be narrowed from stabilization reserves.

"Even though we are collecting less revenues as a result of the closure, we're collecting increased revenues in other areas of the department by \$91,000," said Mr. Downey, noting following questions from Councillor Evelyn Buck on increased membership numbers at the Aurora Seniors' Centre could be a pressure on the facility.

"We are monitoring our use of the Centre by seniors," he said. "We are monitoring the programs as well as their membership. All pressures come on board to an increase of seniors, either a re-allocation of some of that permitable space, or an increase in additional space for seniors, or looking at perhaps capping membership of the seniors in order to address either of those pressures."

As Budget Talks continue over the next month or two, further costs will have to be considered by Council, Mr. Elliott added. Last year, Aurora took on the ownership and stewardship of the Aurora Collection, a diverse group of artefacts formerly owned and curated by the Aurora Historical Society. One of the reasons for the acquisition was to re-establish an Aurora museum but that, so far, remains outside of the budget pending the completion of a Cultural Master Plan later this spring.

Lawsuits have also put a strain on things with John Leach, Director of Customer and Legislative Services, stating they had budgeted for an increase of \$34,600 in insurance premiums but that ultimately won't cut it. Discussions with municipal insurers came back with a 46 per cent increase in insurance premiums overall, which Mr. Leach called "totally unacceptable."

"I started to negotiate with them aggressively and we have got them down somewhat from that," he said. "We haven't finished yet, and I suspect when we come back I will be able to report through the budget process what that amount will be."

Budget deliberations will continue with an all-day session scheduled for 9 a.m. this Monday, January 20, in Council chambers. Members of the public are welcome to attend and make submissions.