

Vaccine announcement factors into 2021 Budget outlook

Aurora's financial outlook could return to a further degree of normalcy near the end of 2021, should a COVID-19 vaccine be rolled out in the New Year.

Council began its deliberations over the Town's 2021 Operating Budget last Monday, November 9, just hours after Pfizer announced promising results for their COVID-19 vaccine.

Should this or any other vaccine reach wide circulation next year, more 'normal' operations could resume from a municipal perspective by the last quarter.

As The Auroran reported last week, Aurora residents can expect to see the municipal portion of their tax bill increase by 2.9 per cent as the Town looks at ways to mitigate the ongoing impacts of COVID-19.

This tax increase, which is lower than the 3.4 per cent hike tentatively approved last year as part of the Town's new multi-year budget program, will translate to an increase of \$70.13 for the average property assessed at \$800,000, and a further \$72.16 in 2022. The average water bill of 54 cubic metres per quarter, will see an increase of \$21.39 for 2021 and \$8.07 in 2022.

That is, if the new figures presented to Council last week are ultimately approved as-is by lawmakers.

Council took its first formal sweep of the 2021 Operating Budget, the portion of the budget that has the most immediate impact on the tax bill, last week.

The projected figures represent realities stemming from the global pandemic and makes some key assumptions on where the global pandemic will stand at this point next year.

'The COVID-related pressures are offset by a one-time savings and also from the funding that we received from the Provincial and Federal Government,' said Rachel Wainwright-van Kessel, Treasurer and Director of Finance for the Town. 'Some of the bigger items that contributed to this [savings] were compensation adjustments, which also include adjustments from benefit savings and the full rollout of any changes to compensation, plus also some changes to gapping assumptions.'

Additional services that contribute to this reduction from 3.4 to 2.9 per cent include deferred costs for a new firehall, which is now forecasted for 2023.

Given the news of the day, the search for a vaccine factored into a look-ahead as to what the revised budget means for community services.

'Our team had to look ahead through 2021 and make some basic assumptions based on where we are [today] and what we anticipate,' said Robin McDougall, Aurora's Director of Community Services. 'In speaking with other Regional directors, getting a sense of what other municipalities may be doing, it gives us a sense of some ballparks.'

'We are all hoping and assuming that sometime in 2021 a vaccine will be coming forward. Therefore, we work backwards with the hopes that by Q4 we will see hopefully a vaccine and ultimately our operations returning to more of a normal way. Therefore, the first three quarters of the year, our team [is] working up towards Fall 2021 being more 'usual' for typical years.'

Over the course of 2020, facility rentals have seen a significant loss in revenue. While this trend is set to continue for the first two quarters of the new year, Ms. McDougall said they do anticipate 'some improvements to that in the spring' but not a full return to ice rentals until the summer.

“We’re also making some assumptions about an increase in cleaning protocols that will be moving forward on how we operate our facilities and ultimately increased screening protocols,” said Ms. McDougall. “If you have visited our centres, we have customer service representatives redeployed to the entrance of the building. We anticipate that model going forward at least for the first three quarters of the year.

“We have made some assumptions [for programs] for the first three seasons of the year, anticipate a lower registration generally across the board for our programs, with each season incrementally rising particularly due to some basic parameters. With the required physical distancing, with capacity limits, based on the space of our rooms and just a general sense from public members, even though we’re open they’re still cautious to return and we have made some assumptions on that.

“Pre-booking registration, for all of our drop-in, even public skates, public swims, lane swims and at the gym, we require everyone to pre-register and we have heard feedback from the public [that] it is troublesome for them and they have ultimately chosen to stay away. It is an inconvenience, but it is something we have to achieve.”

Budget deliberations were expected to continue this week with presentations from Central York Fire Services, the Aurora Public Library, Aurora Historical Society, and Aurora Sports Hall of Fame.

Talks will continue this Saturday, November 21, at 9 a.m. in a virtual meeting.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter