

Water rates set to rise 12% as budget talks continue

By Brock Weir

Aurora residents can expect to pay over \$20 more for their water this year.

According to numbers released Monday and presented to Council during budget deliberations that afternoon, water rates are expected to rise just over 19 cents per cubic metre this year. Combined with increased costs for water at the Region of York, this equates to a net increase of 11.97 per cent for the course of the year.

'We're looking at an increase of 19.27 cents on a cubic metre basis which represents an 8.23 per cent increase on Regional charges and a 3.74 per cent increase from the Town's costs,' said Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure. 'On the waste water rate, we're looking at a 15.68 cent increase per cubic metre, which results in a 6.97 per cent portion of the Regional impact of that rate.'

Combined, average homeowners who use 245 cubic metres of water per year can expect a bill of \$85.67 for the year, or \$21.42 quarterly.

Monday's session provided further tweaks to the proposed tax increase that can be expected by homeowners. At the start of the week, the proposed increase stood at 3.38 per cent, but was impacted by a number of changes, the most significant of which was a further reduction in the amount of interest syphoned of Aurora's Hydro Reserves to provide a cushion for tax pressures.

These pressures, including a \$15,700 postage levy, brings Aurora's projected tax increase for 2014 back up to 3.73 per cent. Combined with tax increases from the Region of York and education rates, this results in a combined tax hike of 1.99 on the residential tax bill. For local property owners, this breaks down to an overall combined tax increase of \$19.87 per \$100,000 of assessment for the year, or \$79.48 for the average \$400,000 property.

Councillor Michael Thompson made the motion to reduce the Town's continued reliance on the Hydro interest by a further \$100,000, continuing a trend which began last year.

'I don't see it as an annual investment income,' he said. 'Someday, that Hydro Reserve won't be there for us to rely upon because we have chosen to use that for some kind of project and then we're creating a future pressure for Councils to deal with.'

'That becomes a diminishing return because that \$34 million [in Reserves] provides less each year as we take that revenue generated from the interest. We keep robbing Peter to pay Paul. It is not an endowment fund. It was meant for a specific project.'

Although Councillors ultimately approved the motion, it was not without some resistance around the table. Councillor Buck's opposition stemmed from the view it would adversely affect taxpayers' bottom line, but Mayor Geoffrey Dawe's opposition was philosophical.

'If we actually had Aurora Hydro in place today, we would be receiving a dividend from them,' said Mayor Dawe. 'We are going to be very fortunate in the next two years or so in terms of looking at a dramatic [increase] in our tax base. I can't support this now, but I would support this going forward.'

Additional discussions surrounded a proposed increase of 40 per cent in insurance premiums faced by the Town, which is expected to come up for further debate following a presentation next month. Aurora's communications strategy, particularly in times of emergencies, was also touched upon.

An evaluation of Aurora's communications following the pre-Christmas ice storm has prompted a review on how Aurorans should be kept informed. Along with an increased focus on social media, Michael Kemp, Aurora's Director of Corporate Communications,

said Aurora is exploring a formal relationship making 680 News the Town's go-to news resource for radio, a departure from the current practice of using 88.5 The Jewel.

With the impending departure of Town Clerk John Leach next week, and the merger of his position into the responsibilities of Town Solicitor Warren Mar, Councillor Evelyn Buck questioned why savings stemming from the job shuffle and departmental merger were not reflected in this year's budget.

"I understand the rationale of the decision was to save money," said Councillor Buck. "I want to know why this isn't reflected in the budget now. We're going to the public with this budget and I want to see the reflection of the savings."

Aurora CAO Neil Garbe, however, said there will be more concrete information in the future once the merger is complete.

"We're still trying to figure out those responsibilities of the new department and the finalized costs over the year," he said. "The savings will be reflected in the budget next year and you will see some savings this year in terms of gapping dollars."

Councillor Buck, however, was not happy with this answer, saying consideration for savings was apparently considered by those recommending the decision beforehand and those numbers should be available.