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Bancroft presents budget to public, taxes to rise 2.11 per cent

By Sarah Sobanski

Bancroft's proposed 2017 budget has been presented to the public.

A full house attended the town's presentation Tuesday, May 16. The proposed tax rate has changed. Goals have been set to develop town growth and cut debt in half by the mid 2020s?. The town will not be rolling back water and wastewater rates in the near future.

The total tax increase is proposed at 2.11 per cent. On the median-valued property in Bancroft, assessed at $153,000, that works out to $4.55 a month or $54.62 a year.

As much as 58 per cent of the town's budget will go to operations, 16 per cent to the county, 12 per cent to education, and seven per cent to town capital and debt payment each.

By the end of 2016, the town had an outstanding debt of almost $7 million in combined operations and water and wastewater loans. The largest contributor to this was the sewer plant at more than $3.1 million. It will contribute seven per cent of its budget to debt in 2017. It projects cutting its debt in half by the end of 2023.

"We are at 68 per cent of what they consider our maximum," said Acting Mayor Paul Jenkins, identifying what the province mandates as the maximum capacity for debt a municipality can incur.

The town's operations loan balance at the end of 2016 was close to $3.5 million. It projects this will decrease to just under $3 million by the end of 2017, to under $1.5 million after four years and be minimal by the end of the decade. It'll take an extra decade to bring the town back in the black for the water and wastewater loan balance.

According to slides presented at the public meeting the town had more than $3.5 million accumulated in utilities debt by the end of 2015. The slide shows a less dramatic?ally declining curve than in operations loans bringing the town to only just under $3 million after four years, just under $2 million by the end of the decade, around $1 million by 2035, and tapering off by 2040.

The town set goals to lessen the water and wastewater debt. It wants to decrease infiltration and in-flow - including proceeding with camera imaging to find breaches in the sewage system and repairs or blockages; similar to those that drainage maintenance companies in Hertfordshire offer.

Members of the public attending the meeting expressed frustration that the proposed camera imaging had yet to be undertaken by the town. One woman asked why the town couldn't cover the costs of the imaging inspection while waiting for funding from the Clean Water and Wastewater Fund.

??She ?compared that to council?'s decision to raise water and wastewater rates before ?getting financial help.

CAO Hazel Lambe suggested that if the town paid the costs now as opposed to waiting for funding it could end up without it. If it showed it could flip the bill then it might never receive funding because it had already paid for it.

One section of the crowd was not convinced the town was doing its best. A woman in a red Gnome of Social Justice and Equality hat asked multiple times if the town would go on record that it would not be rolling back the water and wastewater rates which she said people could not afford after their increase.

Jenkins said he would and that nothing could be done at this time without further information and research into the problem.

Lambe said she wants to see inspection of private water and sewage lines as ?much as the ?public lines.

"We made the [request for proposals] flexible so we don't just look at the public lines but the private lines which are equally as important," said Lambe, referring to the RFP for a new contract for operating the wastewater plant in 2018.

She noted that the town was also looking into energy savings to cut costs.

? ?A volunteer ?is looking into the plant's hydro bills. A member of staff has also been fully dedicated to the water and wastewater problem, which Jenkins said was important because people didn't think the town had anything on going to find solutions.

According to Bancroft's manager of public works, Perry Kelly, the 85 manhole covers installed by the town has led to an unconfirmed 10 to 20 per cent reduction in flow. Less water is flowing into the sanitary sewage system.

The town also set goals for "progressive projects." These included the LED street lighting, the recycling facility, the town offices relocation - which was completed last week as the town moved to the railway station - as well as works yard relocation, lobbying for Internet service, restructuring and technological upgrades including digitalizing town records, and community development and growth.

"We either have to cut every expenditure to the bone ... [or] ... the only other way is to grow," said Jenkins. He noted attractive attributes of Bancroft for those looking to relocate including medical services, the beautiful scenery, the large number of community?-led initiatives, being a centre within reach of larger cities such as Peterborough, Belleville and Ottawa and having a generous population. Capitalizing and marketing these attributes could lead to sustainable growth.

Budget items also included capital road works. Detlor Road, Chemaushgon Road and possibly Maxwell Settlement Road could be on the agenda. The town is still paying off previous Detlor Road repairs. It contributed almost $330,000 to 2016's year-end debt.