

Hastings Highlands approves 2018 budget

By Sarah Sobanski

Hastings Highlands ratepayers won't see an increase in their municipal tax rate in 2018.

At the municipality's public consultation for its operating budget March 19, treasurer David Stewart announced the municipality has seen positive growth since last year. Property assessments have increased \$127,774. This will directly offset the municipality's proposed 1.9 per cent tax levy increase for 2018 bringing it back down to zero.

Ratepayers will pay the same rate they did last year on the municipal portion of their tax bills. The average \$188,000 assessment will pay \$1,372 in municipal taxes in 2018, the same as 2017. County and education rates have yet to be determined.

The total proposed operating budget is just shy of \$9.5 million, up from \$9.2 million last year. Council approved the budget at a special meeting March 21.

Hastings Highlands Council approved an operating budget that will not increase or decrease the municipal tax rate in 2018. This is possible due to an increase in revenues from municipal assessment growth and provincial funding that will be put towards municipal services, Stewart said following council's approval of the budget. Council and staff will continue its plan to make fiscally responsible decisions in an effort to make Hastings Highlands a great community to work, live and enjoy life.

Stewart said the percentage municipal taxation makes up of Hastings Highlands operating revenues has decreased from nearly 80 per cent to a little more than 70 per cent from 2016 to 2018.

Federal and provincial grants make up the next largest portion of those revenues at 19 per cent. This year an additional \$384,250 will be added to municipal revenues between the two. The largest comes from the Ontario Municipal Partnership Fund at \$320,500.

Stewart said this will be transferred directly into reserves for future infrastructure investments. In his presentation, he estimated the critical needs infrastructure deficit in Hastings Highlands at \$10.7 million including needs for buildings and facilities, bridges and roads.

At the consultation he said, "If that revenue source [OMPF] wasn't there, then that would be an expense line that the municipality would have to end up offsetting which... would be in the four to five per cent range on top of what we have here [in the municipal tax levy]."

An additional \$156,000 from last year will also be added to revenues from municipal reserves. This will go to offsetting a one-time waste site monitoring expense, the municipal election, a community development project and Lake St. Peter Fire Station.

Just under 60 per cent of expenses will come from transportation and protection services, historically the highest expense for the municipality. This year they will cost \$3.57 million and \$1.9 million up from \$3.4 million and \$1.8 million.

Increases will go to capital roads funding, equipment and salary increases for transportation services. Protection services increases will go to the municipality's transition to a new CBO, increased bylaw services and increased North Hastings Fire Service and emergency management services.

By the end of 2018 the municipality estimates its debt will have decreased to about \$2 million.