

Budget for Wollaston to be debated

By Jim Eadie

Wollaston Township council held a special public meeting to present their draft operating budget for 2017-'18, which drew a sizeable turnout at the Coe Hill Legion hall on April 18.

The proposed draft presented by treasurer Verna Brundage and clerk Jennifer Cohen calls for a revenue of \$1,274,228 to be collected through taxation in 2017, an increase of slightly more than \$10,000 over the amount collected in 2016.

There are several factors affecting an increase or decrease for individual residential or commercial property owners. Cohen noted that the tax bill also includes the County of Hastings and the school board levys - money collected by the township that flows to those organizations directly.

"The county levy is up slightly this year, and the school board levy is down slightly," noted Cohen.

In addition, the individual property value increase or decrease as determined by MPAC will similarly affect individual assessment. Interestingly, the total MPAC assessment for Wollaston Township for 2016 is \$175,461,275 which is \$768,225 lower than five years ago.

"The overall values of commercial and residential property have declined slightly, and farm values have increased slightly," said Cohen.

This decline has a number of causes but the main reason is that in previous years, more real estate investors had bought properties, hired renovators, plumbers, and roofers (Read More about this here), and sold the renovated property on.

They took a run down property and flipped it into a desirable place to live, meaning they could sell it for more. Thus, the value of residential property would increase. There haven't been as many flips done this year, leading to the current decline of value.

One resident pleaded with council to fully support the new library as a critical part of the community's development.

Beyond clarifications, discussion from the floor seemed to centre in two general areas. Several residents expressed the need for clear sets of expectations and measurable outcomes for publicly funded positions.

"What is the long-term payoff?" asked one resident. "Is there a strong business case to support the position? Is this the best way to spend that money?"

On another related note, questions were asked about the council's a commitment to rectifying staffing problems raised in the recent Mediation and Conflict Resolution final report delivered approximately one month ago. Among other things, this report called for changes to staff reporting, objective-based performance evaluations, completion of an upgraded strategic plan, and a change to a combined manager/CAO model organizational accountability and reporting structure.

"These things cost money, and I don't see it reflected in the budget," noted one resident.

"I think the current staff is at maximum now," said another resident. "You need more support in that office."

"There will be human resources changes made ... there will be performance reviews ... there will be yearly objectives," said deputy-reeve Michael Fuerth. "That's what Fournier (mediator) was proposing. We need a chain of command with roles and responsibilities clearly defined. It is not a staff shortage. We might need a consultant with experience to help ... there could be a cost, maybe \$2,000 ... could we put that in the budget ... absolutely. A CAO, that is my vision ... or manager position."

In February 2012, the previous council terminated the municipal CAO position without cause during a quickly called special meeting. At the time, it was widely speculated to be a cost saving measure as the staffing level was not replaced, except for the eventual use of occasional help in the office. Deputy-reeve at the time, now Reeve Graham Blair, was the lone council member not supporting the removal of the then CAO position.

"The rationale has not been shared with the public," said Blair at the time, noting that the decision was made by a closed session of council. Blair refused to attend the closed session as the meeting agenda he received contained no information of what the meeting was about. Later, council received instructions from its lawyer on what to tell the public about the termination, however, it subsequently decided not to follow the lawyer's advice.

Council will meet on April 25, at which time the draft 2017 budget will be discussed.