

Hastings Highlands council grilled at budget meeting



Former Mayor Ron Emond questions the 2016 Hastings Highlands Budget at a special public meeting of Town Council. Photo by Sarah Vance

By Sarah Vance

Former mayor Ron Emond seized control of a special meeting of council, which took place in front of approximately 250 Hastings Highlands ratepayers last Monday.

"I don't believe I need an introduction," said Emond during question period, addressing the mayor as Vivian, as he declared curb-side garbage collection to be the most significant issue facing ratepayers.

"Municipal government is about providing services," and Vivian, you are taking these away from your constituents," said Emond, who called into question council's data relating to this cost and the contentious decision to withdraw the service last year.

"Where's the accompanying reduction in taxes?" piped in other residents from the floor.

Emond fueled applause as he opposed the 55 cent mileage allowance given to council and municipal employees, suggesting that integrity in administrative costing could lead to a reduction in taxes.

"I don't like numbers being thrown around," said Emond, who is known as the mayor who donated all of his salary back to the municipality, in trust, during his term. "Your poor planning will be costing your taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars this fiscal year."

Councillor Gregg Roberts took opposition to Emond's statements, demanding that he reveal the sources of his information. Retorted the former mayor: "I did not interrupt you when you are speaking, so why do you do this to me?"

Brent Dalgleish, also a former mayor of Hastings Highlands, cited external data sources in questioning council's decisions regarding the allocation of reserve funds. Like Emond, he questioned the integrity of the 2016 budget which will see an increase in taxes of 1.23 per cent.

Mayor Vivian Bloom attributed increases in taxes to downloading from the province, and cited unsustainable policing costs as a factor.

This answer did not appease residents, some of whom accused council of repeatedly hiding under the "skirts of policing costs," while failing to provide transparency about their own operations.

More than 50 slides were presented by the municipality, some of which compared municipal costs to household items like lettuce and car insurance – comparisons which attendees found to be condescending.

It was also demonstrated that provincial downloading trends have been occurring since 1950 – 65 years ago. Although council revealed this as an insight which was expected to gain applause for the budget, it didn't.

Accountability was an issue, as some residents begged for help from the municipality as MPAC assessments increase.

?This is an area for which we do not have oversight,? said Bloom.

Mark Bonokoski questioned why economic development investment represents only approximately one cent per dollar on the budget line, when it is what is most needed.

There was a sense of unease and a lack of resolution, as the meeting was adjourned after more than an hour of questions from the floor.

Despite the fact that the municipality is generating funding through GST/HST rebates, there was a general sense that not enough was being done to address the fact that provincial and federal money is being left on the table and garbage is piling up in the backyard.