

HH council defeats motion to lower taxes

To the Editor,

On March 24, HH council held a special meeting to review the 2016 budget. At the public meeting posted with 24 hours notice, three members of the public were present.

Councillor Nancy Matheson has been working on a plan with treasurer David Stewart to see what items of the new budget could be reduced to lower the tax rate this year. In 2015, taxes rose by 3.9 per cent.

Despite the savings of \$250,000, removed from the budget for curbside garbage service in 2015, the tax increase proposed for this year is 4.8 per cent. With Councillor Hagar, and Matheson's efforts in consultation with the treasurer their aim was to shave 1.2 per cent off current budget allocations to lower the tax increase this year to 3.6 per cent, which they attempted to do with the following motion:

That council direct staff to reduce the proposed 4.8 per cent budget increase by 1.2 per cent (the municipality's portion), inclusive of :

- Eliminating the mileage charged by councillors to attend meetings and/or events held at the Hastings Highlands Centre.
- Council to eliminate their two per cent raise for the year 2017.
- Council to eliminate the companion program.
- Council to take a 20 per cent reduction in their training allowance.
- Staff to take a 20 per cent reduction in their training allowance.
- Eliminate the \$20,000 salary allowance for the "Red Grant" as the program is on hold for 2016.

This would leave a 3.6 per cent increase which has been mandated to the municipality by the OPP.

In further explaining the reason for her motion, Matheson indicated that by working together to find ways to cut costs, even though some are beyond council control, due diligence can be shown by foregoing extra perks and benefits on council/Staff expenses to mitigate increased taxes for everyone.

The vote: "no" from Roberts, Leveque, Cannon, Robinson; Matheson and Hagar voted yes. Mayor Bloom, who previously appeared in favour of the cost cuts, added a no vote for a final count of 5-2, against, and the motion was defeated.

This was followed by a motion from Roberts, seconded by Leveque: that council approves the 2016 draft budget, as discussed March 24, to an increase of 4.76 per cent in the municipal levy. This motion passed with a yes vote from four councillors and the mayor, Matheson and Hagar voted no, and the motion was approved 5-2.

The final budget will be presented to the public on Monday, April 18 at 7 p.m. in Emond Hall at the Hastings Highlands Centre where ratepayers may review details of this year's budget/costs, and address questions to council.

Lorraine Fell