

Significant service cuts possible in Wollaston

By Bill Kilpatrick

This is part two of the Wollaston council special budget meeting. Part one appeared in the March 29 edition of Bancroft This Week.

After council defeated the motion to defer the meeting and have staff return at a later date with an aspirational tax rate target of five per cent, council continued to discuss how to proceed with their budget discussions. Councillor Wendy Mortimer stated "Other than my question about the legal fees, I have no further discussion or points to bring up?" Then despite her voting against the five per cent motion she stated, "I'd be happy to see staff recommend a five per cent decrease on all these categories?"

Walton appeared to notice council struggling with finding a consensus regarding how to proceed with the budget discussion and he suggested that council should "sit down and design a process" for future budget meetings for next year.

Council eventually decided that they would discuss specific aspects of the budget such as the library budget, community grants, the recreation budget, Nellie Lunn Park, and the waste transfer site. At this point CAO Ralph Walton, with approximately 15 minutes left in the meeting, called for a five-minute recess to confer with staff members. Upon his return he thanked council for the brief recess stating, "To summarize where we're at, council had considered a motion to refer the budget back to staff and for us to return with an aspirational five per cent budget. Council has not adopted that [and] were concerned about the time, so as an alternative council [could] recess until March 31?" Councillor Fentie could be heard saying "two o'clock" and Walton responded "two p.m., okay." Treasurer Tracy Vader responded "Today? Today?...oh?" Walton then said, "Yes, that's fine. We were trying to come up with some alternatives that gave you some flexibility." Councillor Fentie remarked, "Everybody's moving all over the place, if we get this done today, or as much as we can, [that would be good.]?"

At 10:35 a.m. Councillor Fentie put forward a motion to recess from 10:45 a.m. until 1 p.m. Fentie then asked if there were any items that they could "knock off" their list before they recessed. Mortimer suggested that council could knock off the issue of Nellie Lunn Park. She said, "In order to come up with a number for there [the budget line] we need to know what our direction is for Nellie Lunn." Mortimer then read a motion asking that council adopt a "low-cost community led approach to reopen Nellie Lunn Park by July 1." Mortimer said the low-cost community led approach involved opening "a wilderness trail from the parking lot to Urbach Lake." CAO Walton said, "We still need a number to plug into the budget." Mortimer insisted that they first needed a direction for the park and that would indicate how much should go into the budget.

Councillor Fentie then spoke up stating that the current approach that was adopted by council in January is "causing concern" and "placing an inordinate amount of demand on township resources we don't have. [It] seems to be moving slowly" and it's coming in at a relatively higher cost relative to what was foreseen in the community-based plan that was already under way and we've been pursuing for a couple years now. What we're looking at is, and what I would suggest is there is a much lower number that can be plugged into the budget, but for that to happen the agreement has to be to follow the previous low-cost community-based approach. Which is more heavily dependent on volunteer resources and fundraising than on town resources and taxpayer dollars."

Council then briefly debated Mortimer's motion, but they ran out of time and council was recessed at 10:45 a.m.

When they reconvened at 1 p.m. council spent the next 40 minutes debating different aspects of Nellie Lunn Park from accessibility issues, the budget number, to possible reserve funds left over from 2017-2018 for park maintenance. Councillor Mortimer's motion was read out by the Mayor who called for a recorded vote. The result was three votes in favour with the Mayor voting against the motion stating "I'm not supporting it. I need to see a plan."

Councillor Fentie put another motion forward to increase the Nellie Lunn budget from \$1,526.40 to \$5,000. Again, the Mayor called for a recorded vote and the result was the same, three in favour with the Mayor opposing it, stating "And I'm opposed until I see a plan and until the neighbours are involved."

After the vote Councillor Fentie said, 'I think in terms of getting this moving we need a motion to actually move forward with this given the timeline. Whether this needs to be part of those motions, or an addendum to them, or a separate motion to outline the activities and responsibilities to get things moving.' Fentie then put a motion forward to change who would be overseeing the work which needs to be completed at Nellie Lunn Park. His motion asked council to appoint 'the CAO act as project principal, with authority to approve project activities at a summary level and provide oversight of the project manager, reporting back to council on progress against cost and schedule.' It also asked council to appoint JD Fentie 'as volunteer project manager, tasked with executing the project to get the Urbach Lake trail open to the public by July 1, 2025.'

There were also other provisions passed by council regarding how progress was to be reported back to council, when a project outline was to be created and what it should contain including 'relevant activities, resourcing, costs and schedule' and specifically that the project manager needed to report back to council monthly in writing. The public was 'encouraged to submit any considerations to the township by email or through delegation to council at the April council meeting' if they had concerns about the park.

The motion also contained a provision regarding the adjacent landowners which stated 'That the public and landowners adjacent to the park be notified that people involved with the project will be onsite from this point forward and due to the schedule constraints no advance notice will be given' and 'that council authorize the project principal and project manager to access the site along with others as required.' Previously, council and staff were required to give 24 hours notice before entering the park. The motion passed without opposition.

Once the Nellie Lunn Park motions were passed council began discussing other budget items such as the library budget, community grants, the recreation budget, and the waste transfer site. The treasurer thought it best that council discuss the items in order as they appeared in the budget. The first item discussed was the community grant expenditures. Council agreed to accept the request from the Tri-County Food basket for \$2,500. Councillor Fentie put forward a motion to 'allocate \$5,000 dollars' on top of the \$2,500 for community grants 'that may or may not come up during the year.' This prompted the Mayor to comment that 'I thought our goal was to take money out of budget to decrease the tax rate?' Fentie responded, 'Yes, and this is part of the process. As I understand it the office would like to understand priorities and this is part of setting the priorities and the amount of \$5,000 out of our \$2 million budget for community grants seems a reasonable amount.' The motion passed unopposed.

Council passed the recreation budget with no changes. Councillor Fentie suggested that the library budget be reduced by \$5,000. When the chair of the library board, Roxanne Lambert was asked about the impact that a \$5,000 cut would have, she said it would likely impact the services that the library could provide. The rest of council did not agree with Fentie's proposal and the library budget was passed three to one with Fentie opposing the motion.

The library board had two other additional motions that they wanted council to approve. One was a renewal of their service agreement and the other was to approve their annual report. After multiple questions and criticisms of the service agreement from Councillor Mortimer that ranged from it not being descriptive enough to a hypothetical question involving what would happen if a car smashed into the building, council approved both without opposition.

After a brief discussion concerning council's previous suggestion to cut \$40,000 from the waste transfer budget the CAO suggested that it be discussed in closed session, so it was not discussed again in open session.

The treasurer asked council if they had any questions regarding the transportation budget while the superintendent of public works was present. Councillor Fentie stated, 'I'm comfortable that I've said what I need to say. It sounds to me like Matt's got a good understanding of my intent and is going to do what he can to get close to what we're talking about. So, I don't want to get into the details. I don't feel the need to pick at different numbers, but that's just me.' CAO Walton had to address Fentie's comment and remind him that the previous motion concerning bringing the budget down to five percent did not pass. Walton said, 'The comments from Councillor Fentie were that Mr. Kehoe 'understands where we're coming from' in regard to cost. The motion earlier today to have staff go away and return that was not carried. So, as I understand it part of the exercise today is that we will get into the detail and will be provided with clear resolutions about where you want reductions. So, I think it is appropriate to be now talking about the

roads budget, if that's council's wish.?

Fentie responded, ?Thanks for the clarification. Can I move for a small break at some point soon?? Council then recessed for 10 minutes.

When council reconvened Councillor Mortimer made a motion to have staff go away and come back with a revised budget that contained a three percent tax increase. CAO Walton cautioned council that ?I'm not certain that it is in order since?earlier today a similar motion was made and defeated. And council has already given direction that they don't want that approach to be taken. We have just spent the last couple of hours going through the work that we understood we would be doing and that has been a line by line [approach to the budget].? Councillor Mortimer responded ?There's still a lot of lines that we haven't? [trails off].?

Councillor Fentie then spoke to the motion stating, ?We haven't actually gone through line-by-line. We've spent the last couple of hours providing input on the items that council has to provide direction. ?we're commencing on the line-by-line and we see that's a big activity, and fair enough. There is a big enough difference between three and five or whatever number is going to be proposed, but I think what we also saw was that there wasn't a fulsome discussion before the vote was taken [on the defeated motion]?I don't think council rejected the approach they rejected the number of five per cent??

CAO Walton then said, ?I'm going to have to defer to the Mayor about whether he wants to allow that motion.? Mayor Fuerth spoke to the original motion stating, ?My understanding of the original motion was to defer the meeting and ask the staff to come back with a five per cent tax increase.?

Council then proceeded to debate about Mortimer's motion and what per cent that they desired. At one point the Mayor commented that ?realistically, after growth and including [the increases] from the County, the OPP, and the school board?just getting down to six per cent is going to be a stretch isn't it Tracy?? The treasurer responded, ?There will be some significant cuts to service, yes.?

The debate continued about what the percentage should be and then the Mayor said, ?Do you want to target five per cent council?? CAO Walton can be heard advising the Mayor, ?You've already said no.? A brief heated debate ensued about the semantics surrounding the wording and intent of the original motion and council members began throwing out different percentages. The CAO stopped and said, ?Whatever council wishes.?

The treasurer then suggested a different approach whereby council could pass a motion giving staff a monetary number they would like to see the budget reduced by, thus avoiding any duplication of motions, but council chose to not take her advice.

After a long silence Mayor Fuerth said, ?Five seems to be the number. Who wants to move it?? Councillor Mortimer moved the motion and it was seconded by Councillor Fentie. The motion read, ?Be it resolved that council direct staff to target a five per cent tax increase, not including growth, and come back for a special meeting of council the first week of April.? The motion was unanimously approved by council. Council then went into closed session.

The original motion that was defeated earlier in the day read ?be it resolved that council defer consideration of the budget and direct staff to work towards an aspirational target of five percent ensuring legal responsibilities of the municipality are maintained and return with a report for a special council meeting to be held the first week of April.? Despite the wording, which appears to be almost exact, neither the Mayor or any councillors brought forward a motion to reconsider, which is required by Robert's Rules of Order to pass a previously defeated motion.

Regarding the next budget meeting the Wollaston Township web page posted the following ?As it the Township's past c, a public meeting on the 2025 budget will be held. The Mayor will work with Council to schedule an evening public meeting.? As of press time no meeting has been scheduled.