

Tough questions for council

To the Editor,

If you have been a regular reader concerning Hastings Highlands council meetings this past couple of years, you would be thinking that curbside garbage pick-up was the only major issue that constituents should be concerned about as we look to the future for Hastings Highlands (HH).

You would be wrong, of course.

Here are some issues that should be on your list as we enter the final two years of this council's term:

Taxes. How does North Kawartha, (Apsley area) manage to run their municipality with a tax rate that is less than half our municipal tax rate? On a \$200,000 assessment in HH (\$1,436 municipal taxes in 2016), you pay \$800 more in property taxes than your Apsley neighbours. Feel good?

Expenses. When you compare HH with Madawaska Valley or Highlands East (municipal neighbours) for ?general government? expenses, we spend twice what they do on this item. What is this in real dollars? Well if we could get to their rate (12 per cent of expenses) we would save about \$800,000 in total expenses in 2016. Translating that to our \$200,000 property, your taxes would drop about \$200 for this item alone. Sound appealing?

Revenues. We have grant revenues in 2016 that are about half of what they used to be. If we could get back to the 30 per cent of revenues from grants we used to be at, we could reduce our municipal property taxes by about \$1.3 million. What does that mean? On our \$200,000 property, that would be a reduction of about 24 per cent or \$320. Of interest to you?

Tax Arrears. Our tax arrears are about 28 per cent of our municipal tax revenues. And it looks like 2016 will see a slight decrease thanks to increased effort lately on this file as it gets more press. But this means we must borrow to cover the shortfall of about \$1.7 million (my estimate for year end), we aren't getting paid. And the bank charges for this line of credit come out of your pocket. I know no one wants to pay their taxes, but when they don't it costs the rest of us. Hard to put in simple terms, but \$1.7 million is a lot. Good performance here? Peterborough and Belleville are at four to five per cent.

Policing. Finally in 2016 HH started to apply pressure through the Rural Ontario Municipal Association (ROMA), their lobby group that was asleep at the switch on this rapidly growing municipal cost in a period of declining crime. Lately it seems ROMA is still fighting to get MPAC data corrected on which the OPP spreads their growing costs for service. But if you review the Auditor General's report, it's clear what good metrics are: ?the OPP, in conjunction with the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services, should formally assess the correlation of its (OPP's) funding and staffing levels with the actual demand for policing services.? Not MPAC assessed values for cellphone towers as ROMA is doing. Our non-negotiable costs based on this formula which makes no sense for taxpayers are forecast to be up by \$286,000 for the OPP or 38 per cent in 2016. Is your income up 38 per cent? Is your council doing anything to get a real grip on these cost increases? Talk to them. It's your tax money going to pay the OPP for cell towers and a lot of other facilities that have no relation to demand for policing services.

Now the above is not to suggest HH is in financial difficulty. It is not.

But you deserve answers to tough questions about where your property tax dollars are going.

If we could get our council to address some of the above items and make progress on them in the last two years of their term, we would all feel better about this council's future ability to restrain tax increases, while still showing concern for services to the community.

We might even give them another term of office in 2018.

Look for more on this. An educated taxpayer is very powerful.

Bill Cheshire, Baptiste Lake