

Wollaston council debates 12.89 tax hike



By Bill Kilpatrick

On March 20 at 8 a.m. Wollaston council held a special meeting to discuss their 2025 budget. Absent was Deputy Mayor Paul Ordanis. The meeting needed to take place in three parts throughout the day and consisted of mixed messages from council to staff, procedural irregularities, long silences, and an extended debate regarding what council should be debating about.

The meeting began with a presentation by Peter Lennox, the vice-chair of the Wollaston Public Library who was attending the meeting electronically. The chair of the board Roxanne Lambert and the CEO/librarian Kelly Veenstra were present to answer any questions that council may have.

The library presentation highlighted the many services and benefits that are offered by the library to the community of Wollaston which included, access to information and resources, both electronic and hard copy, educational support, a place for the community to gather, support for the local economy and workforce development, a place where young people can get engaged and develop skills, fostering digital literacy, providing a safe place for all people, being a cultural and recreational hub, and promoting life long learning. The presentation pointed out that the total circulation and patron visits has been consistently rising since 2020, with patron visits averaging 220 per month.

The library was requesting the same amount of funding that they received in 2024 which was \$41,617 and they asked that council receive their annual report and renew their service agreement. After the presentation Mayor Michael Fuerth made the following comments, "I really appreciate everything that happens at the library. Kelly does a great job and the board does a great job as well." Fuerth said that he was an "advocate for continuing education" adding that we need to "ensure that we have an educated workforce."

There was one question from Councillor Wendy Mortimer regarding the number of visits and how they fluctuated throughout the year. Veenstra pointed out that in April of 2024 171 people visited the library, some 49 people below the average, but In July the library saw 291, which was 71 people above the average. She pointed out that their tracking device tracks everyone who walks through the door and counts them as a patron.

Mortimer then made a comment regarding the library's hours and that she has some people raise concerns about their hours of operation. Lambert pointed out that in the past the library board has received one request from one patron regarding a change of hours. Lambert then encouraged people to contact the library board if they would like them to

extend or change their hours of operation. The Mayor asked if there were any other questions, of which there were none.

The library budget along with the next two items on the agenda, being a request for funding in the amount of \$2,500 from the Tri-County Food Basket, and a report from Matt Kehoe the Superintendent of Public Works regarding lease buy-outs were moved to the budget for discussion.

Next on the agenda was the presentation of the 2025 budget by Treasurer Tracy Vader. The budget was asking council to approve a 12.89 per cent increase in property taxes for 2025. Vader's presentation listed numerous factors that were affecting the budget. Those factors were separated into multiple categories such as council initiatives, mandatory legislation or contracts, external agencies, and factors that are outside of council's control.

?Council initiatives? consisted of things such as Nellie Lunn Park/trail, roadwork for Rose Island Road and Hwy 620, Wollaston Library's annual budget, the purchase/lease of a new Tandem truck, work at the transfer Station, updating office equipment and streetlights, and the purchase GPS units/programming for roads dept. Under the heading ?mandatory legislation or contracts? it listed numerous requirements under the asset management plan such as roadwork, purchase/ lease of a tandem truck, and legislated asset management plan updates. There were also other factors listed which included mandatory fire department training, the updating of fire equipment, and the management and maintenance of two cemeteries. Under ?external agencies? the presentation listed a 5.93 per cent increase by the Crowe Valley Conservation Authority and a 5.06 per cent increase for policing costs. In terms of things that are out of the municipality's control the presentation listed the impact of tariffs on different supplies such as fuel and insurance, a 25 per cent increase in insurance costs for 2025, and existing capital expenditures such as the grader, the fire hall, and Hwy 620 rehabilitation.

Increases per department were as follows: corporate management 7.81 per cent, public areas 20 per cent, fire .3 per cent, transportation 3.8 percent, streetlights 6.7 per cent, waste/recycling management 16.5 per cent, and external agencies 5 per cent. Decreases per department were as follows: emergency management 25.8 per cent, building/by law/ animal control/planning .3 per cent, and recreation 44.6 percent. If approved, the budget would see the total municipal tax levy increase from \$1,890,493 in 2024 to \$2,162,671 for 2025 an increase of \$272,178.

After Vader completed her presentation council had to decide how they wanted to proceed with the budget discussion, whether they wanted to proceed line by line, discuss larger issues one-by-one, or give staff a target per cent that they would like to see the budget at.

Which would require them to defer the budget meeting, let staff try and bring their budgets into line with that per cent and reconvene at a later date.

Mayor Fuerth asked if there were any questions about the presentation and Councillor J.D. Fentie said, ?No, I think that when we get to the budget line items I think this will help us with that discussion.? The Mayor then asked the treasurer to lead council through the line items and Vader responded, ?Well, instead of me going line-by-line I think we just ask council what areas they want to focus on, instead of me focusing on a line item that is of no concern to council. ?last year we were directed to put everything in the budget and it was up to council to make the cuts, so that's what we've done. We've put everything in the budget and we're leaving it up to council to decide where they want to cut.?

Council then spent the next hour asking questions but not making any recommendations about where they specifically wanted to cut. There were questions about revenues and increasing fees, but no numbers were settled on. CAO Walton pointed out that grants are a source of revenue and council and staff then discussed current and past grants they have applied for. Council decided to pass a motion that would allow staff to more aggressively go after capital grants in conjunction with the engineer of record. There were questions about dog tag revenue and potentially increasing the fees for dog tags. Councillor Mortimer asked why the revenue from planning and zoning had dropped from close to \$20,000 down to \$1,000 and Vader explained that was a result of the moratorium that council placed on shoreline sales.

Council moved on to discuss the budget sections on governance and corporate management. Mortimer asked about why council remuneration had risen some 10 per cent. Vader explained that she used a salary grid to calculate the rates and explained that fees associated with WSIB had also gone up. Mortimer then asked about the consultant line item which is budgeted at \$40,000 for 2025. Mortimer pointed out that there was \$71,000 budgeted for consultants in 2024, but they spent \$166,645 which was due, in part, to the former CAO Steven Potter being paid as a consultant as opposed to an employee. She asked, "How do we determine if someone is going to be taken on as a consultant, or a temporary employee, or an employee? Is that their decision or is that our decision?" Walton responded, "It's up to council."

Mortimer followed up her question by asking Vader if the \$40,000 was "based on an expected expenditure on a consultant?" adding "who are these consultants in corporate management?" Vader explained that there was no specific consultant that the money was budgeted for. Vader then further explained about how budgeting works stating "if we're applying for a grant, and again, you just passed a motion directing the engineer to assist us. They're going to charge us for their services?" Walton and Vader then gave other examples

of people who would be considered consultants such as people assisting with the development of their asset management plan or other firms who are retained to do work for the municipality. Mortimer replied, "right," and then jumped to another topic stating, "but there's also corporate management grants for \$6,700. Is that for something else?" Vader explained that the \$6,700 was based on last year's number when council allocated money to the removal of milfoil from Wollaston Lake and allocated funds to the foodbank. Mortimer responded, "Oh, those are grants that we grant. Okay." Vader pointed out that the grant line is an expenditure. After a brief discussion about engineers, Mortimer then brought the conversation back to consultants stating "\$40,000 seems high to me."

Fentie then spoke up stating, "I appreciate that we have a little over an hour left and there's an awful lot for us to unpack. If I was looking at time management, I would look at this and say let's set a target percent; let's identify council inputs that heads of departments aren't in a position to make a decision on and send it back to the heads of departments and say here's a target per cent. I'd use the County's five per cent as an example?" After a brief discussion about ensuring that the asset management plan is followed Fentie replied, "I understand that, [but] we can't every year go back [to the taxpayers] and say we want a 15 or 12 per cent increase. The county is facing all the same pressures we are and they're coming back with five percent. Inflation is running at five percent and unless we're providing dramatic new services, or we have dramatic new expenses we should be targeting that number." Fentie then added, "Is that an approach that people are comfortable with?" Currie responded, "I like that approach." Mortimer then stated "I think there are a couple items that stand out here that I'd like to address [those being] the consultant versus corporate salaries [that] needs to be explained a little bit, and our very high legal fees I'd like some explanation on?"

Council then went back and forth with Fentie asking if council was interested in setting a percentage and Mortimer bringing up line items she wanted discussed such as consultants and legal, suggesting that council "aim for zero" for consultants. The Mayor agreed with Mortimer and suggested that the \$40,000 for consultants be reduced to zero. Walton then said, "We as staff would not recommend that," and Vader reiterated once again that council had just passed a motion "to have your engineer help with grant writing." The Mayor responded "Well the engineer doesn't have to help with all grant writing only grant writing that involves capital expenditures."

Currie jumped in stating, "The question is are we going to try and set a target and then get our department heads "to come back and say what has to be done and what can be done within the target that we set. I think this is a good approach? My opinion is that it would be more realistic to set it at five percent because of inflation and other factors. I would like to

take this approach so we can move on and talk about areas that are of particular importance to council members and hear from the department heads and any of their concerns."

Council appeared to agree with Currie and after some debate about when council wanted staff to return with a revised budget a motion was put forward by councillor Fentie that stated "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.? The Mayor called for a recorded vote. Councillors Currie and Fentie voted for the motion and the Mayor and councillor Mortimer voted against the motion, and it was defeated. The Mayor responded to the vote stating ?This is council's decision. This is council's budget and council should make the decisions on the cuts in this budget. If you want to get it down to five percent JD I'm perfectly okay with that, but it's council's job to get it down to five percent as far as I'm concerned.? Fentie disagreed pointing out that he was not qualified to make those decisions, which was why he was attempting to send the budget back to the heads of the departments to make the necessary cuts.

The meeting had to be ended early due to staff training that had to take place at 10:45 a.m. At this point in the meeting there was 30 minutes left. Councillor Mortimer asked who had to leave and the Mayor informed her that it was the treasurer to which she responded, ?Her presence isn't required for us to have a meeting.? Walton responded ?I would think it would be imprudent to have a budget discussion without the treasurer.?

After council had some unproductive discussions about where the budget was to be cut the treasurer spoke up stating, ?I think it's unrealistic to expect the superintendent of public works to sit today and determine what he needs to cut from his budget. He would have to go back and revisit some of the quotes he's obtained which he can't do in 15 minutes sitting here? so I think it is realistic for us to come back.?

After some debate about how long council would defer the budget discussion for, it was decided that council would reconvene at 1 p.m.

Part two will discuss the remainder of the meeting where council debated the Nellie Lunn Park budget, community grants, the library budget, and the continued debate about the overall budget.