

Council vote to add firefighters pushes 2018 tax hike to 3.97%

By Mike Pickford

Orangeville Council had a change of heart Monday evening, voting in favour of hiring eight new full-time firefighters less than two weeks after initially turning down the request.

Deputy Mayor Warren Maycock was the swing vote in the \$800,000 decision, although he requested that \$300,000 of that total be taken out of the municipality's tax rate stabilization fund in an attempt to lessen the burden on taxpayers. The end result, after Council narrowly approved its 2018 Budget, is a 3.97 percent tax increase for residential property owners. That equates to an increase of \$116.70 for a property assessed at \$363,000 when compared to 2017.

That is a significant jump from the previous 1.53 percent increase that was proposed on Oct. 24 and can almost single-handedly be attributed to Council's decision to approve Fire Chief Ron Morden's request for additional full-time support in Orangeville. The move will help ensure that Orangeville and its neighbouring communities will receive 24-hour, full-time support from its Fire Department.

"First of all, I want to apologize. When this issue initially came to Council I was very torn," Deputy Mayor Maycock told Council as he explained his decision. "I was concerned about the impact it was going to have this year."

He went on to say that he would be happy to pass Coun. Scott Wilson's motion to add the full-time firefighters providing it was partially funded by the tax rate stabilization fund. Coun. Wilson agreed to the amendment and the motion passed 4-3 with Coun. Gail Campbell and Coun. Sylvia Bradley also voting in favour.

Perhaps unsurprisingly Coun. Nick Garisto was not happy with the decision. He, alongside Coun. Don Kidd, spent much of Monday's meeting attempting to remove numerous individual items from the budget, in another attempt to reduce taxes for local residents, to no avail. He asked Council how it could support such a drastic tax increase in 2018.

"I'm very surprised that (one) member of Council voted against this at our last discussion and then, when it was brought to the surface tonight, it passes."

My concern is for myself as a taxpayer. This is a big increase, especially when I didn't hear anyone from the public say "go ahead and hire eight new firefighters", what I heard was "Nick, work with Council to bring the budget down to a zero (percent increase)"? Coun. Garisto said.

He added, "Our people, our residents, our taxpayers are getting hit on water rates, they're getting hit on sewer rates, they're getting at the Town level, they're getting hit at the County level and they're getting hit by assessment. It's too much. It's time we should give them a break."

Overall, the budget tops out at \$62 million, which includes just over \$49 million for operating expenditures, \$8.1 million in capital investments and \$5 million in reserve transfers. That money will be recouped through the tax levy, development charges, user rates, gas tax funds and various government grants.

The Orangeville Police Service remains the Town's largest expense, coming in at just over \$8.2 million again in 2018. More than \$6.1 million has been set aside for Corporate Allocations, with \$5 million allotted for Public Works. Fire Services has ballooned to more than \$4 million following the decision to hire eight new full-time firefighters, while Recreation costs top out at \$2.75 million. Library Services are slated to cost in the region of \$1.85 million.

On the capital side, Council has committed to spending approximately \$59.1 million over the next five years, with \$8.3 million slated for 2018. More than half of that budget is expected to be taken up by various Public Works projects, including the reconstruction of Second Avenue from First Street to Third Street (\$2.1 million). Council has also committed \$425,000 to purchase a fourth bus to round out its new transit system, much to the delight of Coun. Campbell.

"I'm really proud of our buses, finally we have an appropriate bus service in Orangeville," Coun. Campbell said.

Town Treasurer Marc Villeneuve announced that he would bring the budget back to Council for final approval at one of the municipality's December meetings.