

## Town Council agrees to investigate amnesty program for high water bills

By Mike Baker

Some Orangeville residents feel they are being left high and dry by what they perceive to be extortionate water rates.

Less than a month since local resident Shushil Sundil pleaded with Council to provide him with some form of relief after he incurred almost \$3,000 in charges over a two-month period, another Orangevillian this week criticized the way the municipality bills for its water.

"I'm here to raise concern regarding water rates. They seem high, at least when I get my bill. The combination of high water and high property taxes make living (in Orangeville) unaffordable," Susan Schuurman told Council on Monday (July 15).

"I'm asking Council to compare its rates with other municipalities to verify where we rank. Furthermore, if water (rate) reduction occurs, these savings should be passed onto the public to further incentivize good conservation behaviour."

Orangeville's water and wastewater rates are billed to residences and businesses on a monthly basis through Orangeville Hydro. Each property in the municipality is fitted with a water meter, which determines how much water has been used over a single billing period. There are two parts to each charge - a fixed monthly charge, which covers administrative and other fixed costs required to provide the service, and a per cubic metre charge, which covers the operating, maintenance and infrastructure replacement costs.

Orangeville's water rate for 2019 is \$2.23 per cubic metre used, plus the base monthly charge, which for the typical residential and commercial property is \$9 per month. On the wastewater side, Orangeville's 2019 rate is \$1.99 per cubic metre, plus another \$9 monthly charge. When combining the municipality's water and sewer rates for 2019, the average property will pay \$4.22 per cubic metre, with another \$18 tagged on in monthly charges.

According to Heather McGinnity, an engineer within the Town's Infrastructure Services department, based on the total residential water usage in 2018, the estimated average monthly residential water and wastewater bill in 2019 is around \$72.

Still, Ms. Schuurman pressed Council to find a solution to what she called a serious issue in our community.

"High water rates, like high property taxes, can create greater divide and polarization and can be a disadvantage for low income people, or the increasing number of people with temporary or contract work," Ms. Schuurman said. "Orangeville did, at one point, have a water committee. It might be advisable to restore it. There is an awareness of the importance of water safety, but also as water as a necessity for all people."

When Coun. Todd Taylor asked Doug Jones, the Town's General Manager of Infrastructure Services, to provide his opinion on the matter, Mr. Jones expressed his belief that Orangeville's water and wastewater rates "were not too dissimilar" to those of municipalities in the GTA.

Mr. Jones went on to provide something of a history of the municipality's water and wastewater billing system. The municipality has been calculating monthly bills using universal water meters since 2003. When the Town was switching over to this new process - previously all properties paid a flat rate for water and wastewater services - it was determined the municipality had been drastically undercharging for water, so rates, from 2003 until the early 2010s increased sharply year over year.

"Essentially, we collect water rates to provide water and we collect wastewater rates to treat wastewater. We can't use those monies for tax purposes, nor can we use taxes to fund water or wastewater services," Mr. Jones said. "What was determined back in 2002 was that we had been historically under-collecting what we needed in order to provide for the operation of water and wastewater utilities, but also (under-collecting) for the foreseeable capital requirements, as well as long-term life cycle costs."

He added, "The Council of the day was given the option of tripling the amount people pay for water overnight, or slowly but surely increasing what people had to pay (annually) until such a time as we were collecting sufficient monies to cover off the operating, capital and life cycle costs associated with providing water and wastewater services."

For several years, Mr. Jones recalls, the municipality regularly passed water and wastewater rate increases of between seven and nine percent. By 2015, the increase had dropped to less than four percent, and by 2016 to less than three percent. Over the past three years, Mr. Jones says, water and wastewater rates have increased between 2 and 2.5 percent annually, in line with the rate of inflation.

"For some years, the increases were significantly in excess of inflation, however, now we've caught up, I would expect we maintain them at, or around, the level of inflation," Mr. Jones added.

Town staff is currently working on updating its water and wastewater rates bylaw. Mr. Jones noted a report will be coming back to Council before the end of the year, following which he hopes to be able to pass projected water and wastewater rates for the next five years.

### **Water Billing Amnesty**

Coun. Debbie Sherwood tabled a motion late-on during Monday's meeting asking staff to look into the possibility of developing an amnesty program for individuals who have experienced unusually high water bills.

The motion comes on the back of repeated requests over the past 12 months from multiple residents who claim to have received monthly water bills of more than \$1,000, with, apparently, no reasonable explanation. During a previous Council meeting on June 24, Mr. Jones admitted the Town receives complaints relating to this issue from between 10 and 15 individuals annually.

In a letter addressed to Council, Orangeville resident David Kirk condemned the municipality's recent actions, where they have essentially informed those with high bills that there was nothing the Town could do to help their situation.

"It is difficult to read, time and time again, in our local news of yet another person affected by drastically inflated ghost water bills. It continues to be difficult to read the repetitive script of huge increases with no apparent reason, the checklist of possible factors all non-evident," Mr. Kirk wrote. "The greatest difficulty comes from the Town's unhelpful response, and the lack of support from Council in remedying this travesty."

He added, "A fear of setting a precedent is only wrong if it is unjust. These homeowners need your support in terms of action, not just time on your agenda. A single incident may well fall into the possible explanations offered, but how many cases must be presented before those in control realize there is a genuine problem that needs addressing?"

It would appear that Council agrees that this issue should at least be looked into. Ms. Sherwood's motion to have staff looking into the possibility of developing an amnesty program, much like one already in place in the City of London, was passed unanimously. But while Deputy Mayor Andy Macintosh did support the motion, he wasn't sure he wanted to see an amnesty program brought to Orangeville.

"Any amnesty we provide to people with faulty water softeners, or faulty toilets, is going to fall right back on the taxpayer and I don't think that's right," Deputy Mayor Macintosh said. "We'll look into it, but all I hear is people saying they've had a plumber in to look at everything and they've said everything appears to be okay. I asked Mr. Jones and not one person has given a letter to staff from their plumber saying everything is okay. It's all hearsay."

He concluded, "I'm not in favour of any sort of amnesty, unless it's (revealed) to be a Town-wide problem."