

Draft budget sent back to staff with demand for zero tax increase

Despite six budget meetings having already occurred, Orangeville Council is nowhere closer to passing a budget, let alone passing one with a lower increase. At Monday night's budget session, Council adopted Mayor Jeremy Williams' motion to send the budget back to staff and have it brought back at a zero percent increase.

The proposal was made after two hours of the meeting had already progressed, with Mayor Williams explaining that he would like to see each department review their budgets again and bring them back at no increase.

'We're very close to holding it,' said Mayor Williams. 'Only a few percentage points more.'

The decrease necessary by Town Departments to get the budget down to a zero percent increase would be about \$900,000 which means a fairly large number of cuts would likely have to be made.

Councillor Scott Wilson spoke out against the motion, declaring that he would not support moving it forward.

'To try to take another million out of this budget when we are already begging our reserves, again to me is not responsible budgeting,' he said. 'We have spent many hours through several meetings reviewing the budget, and as you said, we have taken out virtually nothing. The message, that just proves that saying to the staff 'take out another million dollars' is a virtual impossibility.'

After a passionate speech behind the move, Mayor Williams convinced council to approve the motion, with only Councillor Wilson and Deputy Mayor Warren Maycock voting against the idea.

'It will be a waste of staff's time to tell them to cut back a thousand here and a thousand there 900 times to hit a magical number of a zero-percent increase,' said Councillor Wilson. 'To me this will be an exercise in futility for the staff, and I think their time could be better spent running their departments, rather than trying to come up with a figure that is not realistic.'

Last Monday, Council met through the Finance and Administration Committee to discuss several topics under the budget, including the proposed Council and Committee budgets.

After passing a motion to vote on honorariums as a separate item, Council approved the proposed council budget without any changes. The Committee budget discussion lasted a couple hours, with the hot topic being First Night, and a motion to remove funding from the event.

'The biggest problem with First Night is that we are completely at the mercy of the weather,' explained Mayor Williams, who put forward the motion. 'This year, the cold weather prevented many people from using the outdoor activities, and because of the wind, everyone was covered in ashes from the fireworks.'

He added that if they eliminated the outdoor activities and the fireworks, the focus could be on indoor activities of which, the swimming and free skates often run thanks to business sponsors.

According to newly appointed CAO Ed Brennan, the event typically brings in about \$11-12,000 from sponsors for the event. If the Town pursued that route, an event could still be run, but at no cost to the Town.

The Mayor's proposal would have seen the funds moved to the Canada Day event, increasing the Canada Day budget from \$16,000 to \$36,000. However, after concerns from other council members that this amount was too high, Mayor Williams amended the motion to see the \$20,000 moved into event reserves, rather than directly to another event.

'The exercise we are undertaking is to get the budget down,' said Councillor Wilson. 'Shuffling this same amount to reserves is not accomplishing anything. If we are eliminating First Night, we could do without the \$20,000 in reserves.'

Despite Councillor Wilson's concerns however, council voted to pass the motion, placing the funds in reserves, and leaving the committees budget at no change by the end of the meeting.

Council's budget process, as well as Council themselves have come under fire from the public since the beginning of this term, both during the public question periods at Council meetings, as well as online through Facebook, Twitter and various blogs.

At this point, it is unknown when staff will bring back the revised budget proposal to Council. Council meets again next Monday, February 9, with the next budget meeting currently scheduled for February 23.