

## Council fails anew to agree on Town's 2015 budget

Another evening of budget deliberations by Orangeville Council, sitting as its Finance and Administration Committee, failed to reach agreement on the Town's 2015 budget.

At Monday evening's meeting, there were several hot topics which took up the hour allotted, resulting in the discussion being called once again at 11 p.m.

The meeting began with a budget update by Town Treasurer Brian Parrott, who provided the information via a tax calculator to show where the current Council had approved budget items, along with additional savings staff had found, to produce the current proposed increase. Currently, the average taxpayer with a home assessment of \$313,701 would see an approximate 0.7 per cent increase on their taxes, the equivalent of \$17.66.

Mr. Parrott also provided a recommendation for the Cost of Living Allowance (COLA) of staff to be changed from 2 per cent to 1.5 per cent, with the option of starting it on either January 1, 2015 (cutting \$59,601 from the budget) or beginning July 1 (cutting \$149,002 from the budget).

Mayor Jeremy Williams began the discussion by putting forward a motion to give staff a 1.5 percent COLA beginning on July 1, 2015. This allowance would still carry a full year, taking staff's COLA into 2016, rather than running from January to December 2015.

"Our intent was never to cut salaries or have staff earn less than what they are currently earning," said Mayor Williams. "It's not right to say to staff that we won't give them something to keep up with the cost of living. The report provided gives us a whole matrix of different COLA values that we could use. I would like to do July 1, as it gives staff a buffer to have the increase continue into next year instead of waiting for the 2016 budget to be finalized."

Both Councillors Scott Wilson and Gail Campbell spoke against the motion, pushing for a January 1 start to staff's COLA percentage.

"Staff will be getting nothing of an increase until July, when that 1.5 percent would kick in," said Councillor Wilson. "That means for 2015, they're only getting a 0.75 percent increase."

Councillor Don Kidd also voiced his concerns that since the increase would not begin until half-way through this year and would not be retroactive to the first six months that staff would technically be receiving even less, as there would be no COLA for the beginning of 2015.

"I do want to remind everyone that we are already at the end of February," said Mayor Williams. "This is just one of those things. We have difficult choices to make, and if we don't make them somewhere, we won't get to where we need to go. I could be saying that staff would get a zero COLA, but I'm not going to suggest that."

A new motion was put on the floor by Councillor Wilson to give staff a COLA of 1.75 percent, beginning on January 1, 2015. The motion was passed at a vote of 4-3. With the approved COLA, the budget saw another decrease of \$29,800, putting the tax increase at 0.6 percent, to the equivalent of \$15.51 to the average home assessment.

This was followed by a motion to add \$5000 to the budget for the purchase of two new defibrillators for the Operation Centre and Water Pollution Control Plant.

"We have to get serious with this budget," said Councillor Nick Garisto, Chair of the Finance and Administration Committee. "We have to make a tough decision if we're going to take this budget down to zero. With the way we're going, we keep adding on and numbers keep going up. People can no longer afford to stay in this town."

Mayor Williams recommended that the next step should be to ask staff to find 0.61 percent in savings throughout the year, equaling \$178,345, which would bring the budget to produce a zero percent tax increase. Staff would be required to cut operational costs where they could throughout the year, and if they couldn't, at the end of the year, the money would be pulled from reserves to cover it.

Finding ways to create a savings throughout the year is something staff does annually anyways, Councillor Sylvia Bradley said during the discussion.

"Every year we do this, every year we look for savings throughout and at the end of the year is either surplus or deficit," she said. "Staff budgets really close to the line. They do not plan for surpluses. To ask staff to find savings, it's not their responsibility. If this council wants to cut costs, then they need to find things they want to cut services on. We don't have reserves to draw from because drew from last year and not putting back in."

According to a chart on the surplus/deficit numbers, since 2003, the town has accumulated \$2 million in deficits, and on a year-to-year between 2009 and 2013, only 2013 saw a surplus at the end of the year from year-round savings.

"If we need to reduce the budget by that much, council needs to do it, not staff," said Councillor Campbell. "They have done their very best, brought the budget they need to make the town function. If we are looking for more money to be reduced, it's our job to do it. If we are going to reduce it, we need to have the courage to do it, not force staff to."

When the vote was called on the Mayor's motion to put the remaining 0.61 percent in the hands of staff, the movement failed, with only Mayor Williams voting in favour. This was followed by yet another motion, made this time by Councillor Garisto, to take the \$500,000 in dividends from Hydro, and use a portion of that to bring the budget back to zero before giving the remainder back to hydro customers.

Orangeville resident Alan Thoms took the podium to share his thoughts on that decision, as he passionately addressed council.

"That \$500,000 does not belong to this council, it belongs to the people," he said. "I don't know what it will take to get it through to you, but that money belongs to the people. It should never have been brought back in here, and it should not be a part of the discussion."

That motion also failed at a vote of 3-4, with Mayor Jeremy Williams and Councillors Nick Garisto and Don Kidd in favour. Councillors Gail Campbell, Sylvia Bradley and Scott Wilson, along with Deputy Mayor Maycock were opposed.

The Finance and Administration Committee will meet again on Monday, March 2 to continue budget deliberations.