

11th budget session fails to make progress

After another lengthy meeting Monday, Orangeville Council's budget committee has failed again to pass the Town's 2015 budget, and made little progress on decreasing the tax impact on residents.

The evening began with several residents expressing concern that Council is not exercising due diligence in both working on the budget and making the hard decisions necessary.

"This is the 11th Town budget meeting," said resident Alan Thoms. "The members of this Council are demonstrating such apathy towards the residents and taxpayers. Council still hasn't learned to say no. The time has come for some hard decisions that may affect the level of services, but may be necessary."

He added that being elected does not allow councillors to operate personal agendas, and that while some attempts have been presented to reduce the budget, those who do not appear to care have continuously hampered them.

Despite several requests from committee chair Councillor Nick Garisto to keep the public question period to questions only, residents continued to speak their concerns to the committee.

"I've been watching these meetings at home, and boy oh boy, you guys have a lot of explaining to do," said Jo Ann Bourque. "We expect you to act professionally and wisely, yet you have been unable to move forward with this budget. It is truly disgraceful that residents feel the need to take you to task on your behaviour. Is it too much to ask for you to get rid of your smug attitudes and work together?"

She continued, expressing concerns that Orangeville's taxes are some of the highest in the province, yet the reserves sit dangerously low.

"It's simple math and it screams mismanagement," she said. "This situation highlights the incompetence and failure of the previously elected officials. It's time to be fixed. You cannot be fixed on spending money on your wayward ideas. You might get your spending, or you might get your reserves, but you cannot have both."

The Committee was also presented with a petition by local resident Trevor Castiglione, containing 1000 signatures, declaring that the taxes are outrageous and demanding something be done. According to Councillor Sylvia Bradley, her name is also on that petition.

"I too signed the petition because I do not want a 4 percent increase," she said.

"I don't think anyone on council wants that kind of increase, and we are still working on the budget."

Mayor Jeremy Williams suggested early in the meeting that rather than providing the additional amounts recommended to put into reserves from the budget, the Town should look into selling some assets and putting that money directly into reserves. The initial \$400,000 approved for reserves contributions would still remain, but selling assets could offer the potential to put more into reserves this year than the \$1.2 million currently approved.

"I want to put this forward and give our taxpayers a break this year," said Mayor Williams. "Let's put the \$400,000 into reserves and be really careful not to spend it."

Councillor Scott Wilson put forward the potential sale of the Humber College property as one of those options, which he said would produce about \$4 million. With just under \$2 million remaining owing on the property, this would see a reserves contribution of over half.

However, Councillor Gail Campbell's fear was that if this was the direction Council chose to pursue, should no sale occur, the contributions also wouldn't occur. The Mayor's motion failed at a vote of 3 to 4.

In the second half of the meeting, the Committee opted to look at several departments individually, although little came of those conversations.

After a total of 3 ½ hours of budget meeting, the results were merely a \$30,000 decrease to the Parks and Recreation department budget with the removal of the Façade Grant for the 2015 year, and an in-line item of \$176,000 from a reduction for property taxes owed to the Town this year.

The Façade Grant allows businesses in Orangeville to renovate the front of their buildings and update them to look more professional and attractive. The motion, put forward by Councillor Wilson, would not see the program eliminated permanently, but put on hold for this year.

"The Façade Grant helps to make our town beautiful," said Councillor Campbell. "It pains me to support this, but I am going to support taking out the \$30,000, and the businesses will unfortunately have to wait one more year to do it."

Although Councillor Bradley opposed cancellation of the program for 2015, due to the high number of applications they receive, the motion carried with only Mayor Williams and Councillors Bradley and Garisto voting against it.

The meeting was adjourned at 11 p.m., leaving the budget's current tax impact at a 3.31 percent increase, or the equivalent of \$84.02 on the average assessed home of \$313,000.

The next budget meeting will be held next Tuesday, March 31 at 7 p.m.