

## Mono council gets closer to preferred tax levy increase

By **JAMES MATTHEWS, LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER**

Another round of project cuts and repurposing money has brought Mono closer to its tax levy increase target.

Les Halucha, the town's treasurer, said his original focus was to strive for a four per cent tax rate increase for ratepayers. The budget's second draft was initially at a 5.5 per cent levy increase.

That meant about \$126,000 more needs to be cut to get a four per cent levy, he told town council Mar. 14. By the end of the meeting, council had whittled the proposed budget down to a 4.55 per cent levy increase.

Council asked staff to keep working toward a four per cent levy increase and to return at the end of the month to report to council.

The first draft of the 2023 municipal operating and capital budget was presented to council on Feb. 28. That version required \$2,812,390 be eliminated to achieve the four per cent target.

In order to reach that tax levy target, it was suggested money in reserve funds be re-directed to pay for 2023 capital projects. And this year's contributions to reserve funds could be deferred.

Then, at a special meeting on Mar. 2, council managed to cut about \$240,000 from the proposed budget. Treasury staff was asked to return to council on Mar. 14 with ideas of how to further make cuts to the municipal spending plan.

Halucha said municipal department heads deferred capital projects where possible and removed reserve contributions to be made this year for future projects. Reserve money was repurposed as revenues to offset capital costs required to go forward in 2023.

The budget was further reviewed line by line.

The result was \$2,310,525 eliminated, and revenues increased by \$501,865. The total amount being \$2,812,390. The increase in revenues included an additional inflationary increase of 1.5 per cent for \$126,762.

Halucha suggested town use \$45,000 from its fire reserve fund to help pay for the fire protection service contract with the nearby Town of Orangeville. That was an area that saw a large increase this year.

"I would strongly urge the treasurer to get in touch with Orangeville to see whether they will average out the fire budget contribution because that could be the source of \$100,000 right there," said Mayor John Creelman.

The greatest cost increase for 2023 was in road projects that were hoped to be completed this year.

Halucha said the \$1.1-million in reserve contributions were clawed back in deferred bridge projects.

Deputy Mayor Fred Nix said the treasury has the levy increase at an amount with which he's comfortable.

But...

"We're just kicking the problem down the road," Nix said.

Particularly with work to restore Bridge 5 on Hurontario Street north of County Road 7, which had a price tag of \$1.7 million. The town had initially planned to squirrel away \$850,000 in a reserve fund in 2023 for that bridge in the future.

Now they're putting nothing away for work that will have to be done later.

"It seems to me we're just pointing to a big problem next year when we develop the budget," Nix said. "I don't know how next year's budget is going to be any easier."

Halucha said concern for the next budget is a valid concern. But they're trying to get through the problems of this year's spending plan.

"When next year comes, deal with next year's budget," Halucha said.

Councillor Melinda Davie wondered if there could be a "happy medium" achieved by lessening the amount saved in reserves.

"That is scary to know that it's just going to cost more [in the future]," she said.

Coun. Elaine Capes said there's a need to be ruthless with budgetary cuts. She said she's managed to find areas to trim \$170,000 from the budget.

"I think," Capes said.

One of those cuts is \$100,000 for CLI-ECA compliance approval. That's Consolidated Linear Infrastructure Environmental Compliance Approval, a process governing land development and government by the Ministry of Environment, Conservation, and Parks.

Halucha said the cost has already been reduced to \$50,000. But something has to be done in 2023 to ensure that compliance, he said.

"Personally, I would like to see us find that \$126,000 and have a four per cent increase to the taxpayer and live with the decisions, the hard decisions that staff have had to make to bring that \$2.8-million out of this budget," she said.

Capes said she will hold out for the four per cent levy increase. People are stressed enough in the waning days of a worldwide pandemic.

"Fifty dollars or \$150 could break somebody," she said. "We are very privileged in this position to say it's only \$150, it's only 50 cents a day.

"There are people living on fixed incomes who are suffering."