

Council discusses budget for first time, looking at 6.2 percent tax levy increase

Written By **PETER RICHARDSON**

Shelburne Council gathered for its first budget meeting of the year on Monday (Feb. 4), with the Town's elected officials fighting an uphill battle to try and reduce the 7.7 percent tax levy increase presently proposed.

In what was a special session organized primarily to get a head start on the budget, Council worked hard to bring the budget down.

With Assessment growth down to a mere 0.69 percent from the previous year's 4 percent. Revenues for the Town were also substantially down from 2018.

Mayor Wade Mills opened the session with a line-by-line investigation of the draft budget presented. As each item passed without change, it became apparent that there was certainly no fat in the draft and, after two hours of work, Council had cut only \$1,500 from the Budget.

Prior to the start of the deliberations Treasurer Carey Holmes cleared up a few points of reference regarding the Draft Budget, noting that although there are \$20 million in capital projects facing Council, the cost of borrowing that amount of money, was not included in the Budget.

It was also brought to the attention of the gallery, that taxes are based not only upon the Town Budget, but also are dependant upon the County and the School Board levies, which were not reflected in the Draft Budget. Ms. Holmes noted that certain grant monies that the Town relied upon had also not been allocated at this time and that the OFPF grant would likely not be as large as anticipated, if it came at all. She went on to explain that if the reserve schedules were changed this year, so too, would the Budget. .

A discussion was held between Coun.Lynda Buffet and the Treasurer, concerning taxation arrears and whether or not these were routinely addressed. The answer was yes and the Town, after the two year waiting period, usually prosecuted 13 cases annually. She noted that in all cases the Town received their taxes and that most cases were paid before they went to court.

Mayor Mills questioned the need for new Town Hall front doors, and was informed by Jim Moss, Town Director of Development and Operations, that the current doors would not seal properly, allowing snow to enter the foyer and also would, sometimes, jam even when unlocked. That allows a considerable amount of heat to escape the building, which increased heating costs as well.

The replacement was left in the Budget. There was also a lengthy discussion about the back-up generator for Town Hall, to offset power outages, with several Councillors questioning the \$50,000 expenditure and it's necessity.

Coun. Walter Benotto, presented a motion to use the wages, set aside for the currently non- existent Town Hall maintenance person, to hire someone to jumpstart getting more events in Fiddle Park and the Grace Tupling Hall. He suggested using up to 75 percent with the last 25 percent being used for commissions.

CAO Denyse Morrissey intervened to say that a complete organizational realignment review was going to be conducted by staff and that this would undoubtedly address these funds. At present, many staff members have been stepping up to take on responsibilities not in their job description and that this could not continue, in the future, as it was negatively affecting their regular duties. Ms. Morrissey indicated such a review would take six months to complete.

Next up, came Planning and Development and the subject of development charges, a subject near to the heart of Coun. Buffet, who campaigned on raising them substantially.

Council was told that these charges were currently under review, but that development charges would not be seen as a major source

of revenue in the foreseeable future, due to the fact that Shelburne has no more land to accommodate further large scale developments. Councillor Buffet countered that the existing two developments would generate substantial income with increased charges, but was informed by both the CAO and the Clerk that this was not the case, as they were protected under their current agreements to the existing DC rates at the time of their approvals to build.

Coun. Benotto then asked when the Town was going to look at acquiring land in the west end, for development. He was informed by the Clerk, Jennifer Willoughby, that this was not simply a Town decision, but that first the County had to review and approve extending the Town limits and then the Town had to convince the Province that expansion was a necessary move.

The Fire and Police budgets were both seen to be unacceptable to Council and motions were passed to return them to their respective Boards, for reassessment. This move could potentially prove to be the best opportunity for a reduction in the tax levy, as both services constitute a large portion of the budget.

A moment of levity followed, when Coun. Benotto questioned the validity of the income figures for bylaw and property standards. Upon seeing, that dog tags only amounted to \$20,000, he stated that this could not possibly represent the canine population of Shelburne, as, when he was campaigning he encountered dogs at almost every home and sometimes multiples of them. He also advocated for an increase in parking ticket fees, from the present \$10, which was cheaper than most parking rates in other communities. The clerk said that all fines were currently under review.

Coun. Buffet asked if the Town could not employ parking banks, to which CAO Morrissey stated that they cost upwards of \$20,000 and that since parking in Shelburne is free, they would be, in essence, useless, unless the town adopted paid parking. Nevertheless, a motion was passed to have staff report on acquiring parking banks.

EDC person, Carol Maitland reported to Council on the EDC initiatives behind their Budget requests, focusing primarily on new gateway signs and a newcomers guide of services and businesses in town. The signage was a \$100,000 per year project spread over three years, to accommodate the demands of a RED Grant, applied for by the EDC. The new Town website will also be up by the end of March.

The stickler, was the asking for \$50,000 this year for the gateway signage on the Town entrances. Although the existing signs are in need of replacement, they would suffice for another year in some minds. The item, for the moment, was left in the Draft.

The newcomers guide brought out a lot of discussion, primarily centring around it being printed and its delivery. Many on Council felt that a digital version made more sense. It was pointed out that many in town still do not use computers and that a printed reference, though subject to errors in content, as businesses change, was still preferable.

The meeting moved onto Public Works and it was here the first major cut occurred. Much of the interlocking stone and many sidewalks, in town, require repair or replacement and this was a big ticket expense. After much deliberation, it was decided to remove \$73,000 from the budget for this work and wait until the Town decided on how it wants to landscape the downtown area.

Mayor Mills then proposed a motion to forego the purchase of the new Town Hall generator and use the \$50,000 allocation to reduce the tax levy. Combined, with the other savings, this amounted to a total reduction of 1.78 percent overall.

So, at the end of its first budget meeting, Council was able to reduce the tax levy to 6.2 percent from the original 7.7 percent, with the opportunity still existing for further reductions.

The public are formally invited to attend the Public Budget Meeting, this coming Monday, Feb. 11 2019, in Grace Tupling Hall. They are encouraged to bring their thoughts suggestions and ideas to put before Council, at that time.