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County budget reflects today?s services, invests in future

Written By JAMES MATTHEWS

Dufferin County is working with an almost seven per cent tax levy increase so far in the early stages of 2026 budget preparations.

Council heard during its Jan. 8 meeting that residents would have an increase of about eight per cent over last year if the budget was to be adopted as it is. With growth factored in, that levy is lowered to 6.87 per cent.

Aimee Raves, the county's treasurer and corporate finance manager, said the 2026 spending plan is geared to balance strategic objectives with fiscal responsibility.

?Not all goals are achievable within current financial constraints,? she said. ?As a result, some initiatives have been deferred or scaled back, and sustaining existing programs and services remains challenging.?

The 2026 capital and operating budget reflects the resources required to continue providing services the county offers.

Additional expenses added in the late stages include a $300,000 Shelburne bypass contribution, $200,000 for a road safety master plan, and a $300,000 capital contribution enhancement.

Reserve funds are used strategically to offset one-time costs and stabilize the budget, but ongoing reliance is not sustainable. For 2026, allocations from the Rate Stabilization Reserve have been reduced to preserve future flexibility.

?Maintaining healthy reserves helps protect against unexpected expenses and supports long-term financial stability, minimizing the impact on taxpayers,? according to a budget overview provided to council.

?Significant capital work is planned for 2026, resulting in a notable dip in capital asset fund balances.?

The county faces decisions on how best to fund the road rationalization payments and the Shelburne Bypass, balancing between capital reserves and tax levy contributions.

Raves said staff worked diligently during budget preparations to put off some capital projects to future years given current financial pressures. The capital asset fund will be in the negative by 2030, she said.

?The driving factor is that costs are increasing faster than our contributions,? she said.

The budget represents the planned work over the next year, highlights the key initiatives that support the strategic direction of Dufferin County, and outlines some of the challenges that impact the organization.

It reflects the cost of providing services today and investing in the future.

The 2026 spending plan is impacted by a number of external factors including uncertainty around federal and provincial policy changes and funding, economic conditions including exchange rates, tariffs, and inflation, and labour market pressures.

These factors put not only direct financial pressure on the county but also affect staff and resource capacity.

?Expenses have increased significantly, mostly due to planned capital work which will require borrowing,? according to the overview. ?Another large portion of the increase is offset by government transfers and a continued strategy to mitigate some of the remaining impact by applying reserves.?

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Raves suggested there be a $35,000 transfer to the county's capital reserve funds and $250,000 to its rate stabilization reserve.

?When it comes to reserves, we can apply more or less than what is being proposed,? she said.

After much discussion about various aspects of the spending plan, Coun. Wade Mills, Shelburne's mayor, said he was ready to green-light the draft budget as it was. The intent of the meeting wasn't to accept the proposed budget, but Mills and Nix were both satisfied.

?If there's more to it, then I'm happy to hold off,? Mills said.

?We do need, I think, to do a little bit more work on the wage market review piece, for one thing, to get the exact number there,? said Sonya Pritchard, the county's CAO.

Pritchard said council would benefit by waiting for a treasurer's reserve fund report that will soon be tabled.