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County Council gets first look at cost of COVID-19 across Dufferin

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It's projected the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic could dig Dufferin County a nearly $1.5-million hole.

The World Health Organization dubbed the COVID-19 novel coronavirus's spread to be of a worldwide pandemic reach on March 12. And, a little more than two months later, Dufferin County is beginning to see the financial implications that have been brought to bear on the region.

Aimee Raves, Dufferin County's acting treasurer, said in a report to council May 14 that a year-end projection describes a possible deficit of $1,485,000.

?This is our first crack at it and it's a worst-case scenario,? she said in tabling the document. ?It's based on a number of assumptions. Those assumptions seem to be changing daily.?

And from the document verbiage: ?It is likely that the estimated deficit will be considerably less than $1.5 million and that the shortfall can be accommodated within the 2020 budget.?

There are five main drivers to the deficit: Additional staffing requirements for Dufferin Oaks and Paramedics ($775,000); an increased need for personal protective equipment and related supplies ($415,000); enhanced cleaning throughout county facilities ($730,000); a reduction in investment interest ($228,000), and a combined reduction in supplemental tax levies and increased tax write offs ($280,000).

Councillor John Creelman, Mono's deputy mayor, said the financial projection paints a dire picture of the pandemic's costs this far. And, he said, that's an important detail to keep in mind: The pandemic hasn't yet passed and the price tag could escalate.

?I think it's fairly straightforward,? he said.

Ms. Raves said Dufferin County's monetary situation will be closely monitored and council will be kept apprised of any changes to the financial projection.

Other areas anticipating increases include Ontario Works as the federal Canada Emergency Response Benefit assistance ends, offset by provincial funding. However, the funding for the administration of this program is currently capped at the 2018 levels which may create an additional overspend in the event additional staff are required to adequately deliver the service.

In a report to county council, Ms. Raves said community housing will experience increases in subsidies to landlords related to rent geared to income of tenants.

?Rent revenue from the county's own buildings is not anticipated to decrease significantly as the majority of units are either designated for seniors or affordable housing units,? she wrote.

Dufferin Oaks has received $75,000 in additional funding to date to offset costs associated with COVID-19. The annual funding increase has come in slightly higher than budget, which will help offset costs.

The provincial government recently announced what's been called pandemic pay for front-line health care workers. That includes a $4 per hour raise for 16 weeks.

?Notice has been provided by the Ministry of Health that all costs associated with the 16-week ? increase for staff will be covered by

the province,? said Ms. Raves in her report.

As such, those costs to Dufferin Oaks and the county's paramedic service have not been included in the deficit projection.

Waste Services will be moving to a new vendor for the disposal of recycling in June.

?The contract amount has come in lower than anticipated, creating some small savings,? she said. ?However, these are more than offset by the continued decline in the recycling market where we are anticipating far less revenue than budget.?

The county will see monetary savings in work spaces and offices closed by the pandemic. And there will be some small savings in less maintenance, supplies, and other materials required at those buildings.

There are a number of strategies that can be utilized to offset the projected deficit. The report indicated the county has a healthy rate stabilization reserve balance of nearly $3.8 million, including a $1.4 million contribution from 2019 operating surpluses. ?However, with the full economic outlook becoming less positive as the year progresses, it is better to look at in-year savings as we anticipate future year budget pressures and hold onto reserves to address these pressures,? Ms. Raves said.

?Funds currently held in the savings account as well as some short-term investments are available to assist in months when it is needed most, particularly when there are large capital outflows later in the summer.?