County council to reconvene and work on lowering tax increase]

Written By **Paula Brown**

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Dufferin County council will be taking a further look at its 2023 draft budget at an upcoming special meeting after concerns were raised over the suggested 5.79 per cent tax levy increase.

During their meeting on Feb. 9, Dufferin County council gave a brief presentation on the draft 2023 budget from Aimee Raves, corporate finance manager and treasurer for the county. The presentation detailed additional expenses added to the draft budget.

?2023 is sure to bring additional challenges and opportunities. The impacts of the pandemic continue to reverberate, inflation appears stuck over 6 per cent, cyber threats are more and more prevalent, mental crises and social inequity continue to be far reaching,? said chief administrative officer Sonya Pritchard. ?Having a strong, connected community with supportive and responsive services for all residents is more important than ever. This budget puts forward a plan that ensures those services are available and helps move the county forward as a new Strategic Plan is developed.?

In the county's initial 2023 draft budget, the suggested tax levy increase was 4.18 per cent. The tax levy is the amount of money required to be raised from property taxes to fund the business of the county.

During the Feb. 9 meeting, additional expenses were added to the draft budget, including additional staffing ($425,000), new transit service ($305,000), Food for Thought Grant ($70,000), paramedic addition ($150,000), and the International Plowing Match ($787,000).

The additions totalled over $1.5 million and increased the tax levy to 5.79 per cent in tax dollars.

Following the presentation, concerns were raised by some councillors on the nearly 6 per cent tax levy increase.

?I don't have the background or the confidence right now in the staffing requests that have been made to legitimately sit here and be able to tell my constituents that I feel good about voting in favour of what's happened,? said Coun. Todd Taylor.

Specific areas of concern included the new staffing positions for Dufferin County and the cost of hosting the 2023 International Plowing Match.

The 2023 budget overview included the addition of six new positions: development review technologist/engineer, corporate climate initiative coordinator, facility coordinator, IT service desk manager, payroll clerk, and quality coordinator.

?I'm not comfortable with the level of staffing request that are put in here. I look at things like the IT manager and wonder why we're doing it. It feels like we're past that,? said Coun. Taylor.

?We have to understand when it comes to the staff additions, that we are a growing county and we have to be able to have the capacity to do the work,? said Coun. Janet Horner.

Coun. Lisa Post brought forward the idea to use an extra $500,000 from the tax stabilization reserve, which sits at $7 million, in the 2023 budget to mitigate the impacts of the International Plowing Match (IPM) on the tax levy.

?We've got a lot of uncertainties ahead of us in the future and we know that we've got some additional staff needs, but we know that our residents are feeling the pressure of inflation today,? said Post. ?So, if we can do something to mitigate those increases and help balance out some of the new costs that we have for the International Plowing Match, it would be a great way, I think, to leverage that.?

Coun. Gail Little shared her support for the use of the tax stabilization reserve to support the event.

?There are some one-time events that have a price tag,? said Litte. ?It does help offset the cost of those one-time events so I think it could be useful for this year.?

According to Raves, the use of $500,000 from the tax stabilization reserve for the IPM event would bring the tax levy increase down to 4.61 per cent.

A complete overview of the 2023 Dufferin County draft budget can be found on the county's website.