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Dufferin County eyes 4% tax levy increase

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Dufferin County councillors are back at the table, crunching numbers as they begin deliberations over the 2024 budget.

Dufferin County Council met for a special meeting last Thursday (Nov. 23) to review the 2024 draft budget, give each councillor a look at the financial blueprint for the upcoming year, and determine the tax levy increase.

Aimee Raves, manager of corporate finance and treasurer of Dufferin County, presented an overview of the 2024 draft budget to councillors, which included a recommended tax levy increase of 7.45 per cent or $49,018,000 in tax dollars.

The tax levy is the amount of money required to be raised from property taxes to fund the business of Dufferin County.

According to Raves' report, for the County to continue with its current services, also known as the status quo, the tax levy increase would be 7.36 per cent plus 1.81 per cent for additional costs for staffing, paramedic enhancement and the physician recruitment program.

Factoring in the assessment growth rate, which is at 1.72 per cent, would bring the status quo down to 7.45 per cent.

Raves noted that the tax levy increase is ?high? and that staff had connected with other municipalities to see if they had similar increases.

?It seems that the average is about five per cent, which is reflective of what inflation has been,? explained Raves.

A one per cent reduction in the tax levy is equivalent to $448,996, so in order for County Council to lower the tax levy to four per cent, they would need to reduce the 2024 budget by 1.5 million.

To lower the tax levy increase, Raves provided council with three options, which included using more reserve funds, reducing capital levy contributions or changing the level of service.

?This is what it would take for us to continue doing exactly what we are doing now, as well as move forward all the plans approved by council,? said Raves.

While faced with finding ways to lower the tax levy increase for 2024, Dufferin County Council is also having to consider how to include the 2023-2026 Strategic Plan.

In June, Dufferin County Council approved their Strategic Plan, which will act as a roadmap to help guide plans for the future. The Strategic Plan highlighted specific goals in five priority areas, including climate and environment, community, economy, governance, and equity.

?Part of the strategic plan process does require us as staff to bring forward requests to council for the necessary resources to advance the initiative and goals in the plan,? said Sonya Pritchard, chief administrative officer for the County.

Pritchard mentioned that the meeting to discuss the 2024 budget was to define the level of investment the County will provide to achieve the objectives in the Strategic Plan.

?Advancing the strategic plan does require investment, and the budget process allows you to set limits on objectives that have already been identified,? she said.

?Without adequate investment progress, the goals will not occur. It doesn't mean there has to be maximum investment, but without some investment, progress will not occur, and lack of progress isn't neutral. It can have negative consequences either in the short or the long term.?

Each Dufferin County Committee had the opportunity to present their budgets for the upcoming year during the 2024 Draft Budget meeting.

Throughout the meeting, councillors raised concerns regarding each committee budget and noted specific items to help lower the tax levy increase.

?I think we do ourselves a disservice if we don't try very hard to get down to that five per cent [tax levy] level at least and to find the 1.1 million in here,? said Coun. Janet Horner, Mayor of Mulmur. ?I'm not sure that I can realistically go back to my community and say ?we got a big increase at County', it's just a lot for people these day.?

At the end of the meeting, County Council was able to indicate five specific revisions to the budget that would reduce the budget by about 1.5 million and lead to a tax levy increase of 4 per cent.

Dufferin County Warden Wade Mills suggested allowing staff members a chance to update the 2024 draft budget with the recommended revisions before councillors voted to approve the draft.

A revised 2024 Draft Budget will return to County Council at their next meeting on Dec. 14.

The full 2024 draft budget overview and the breakdowns for each committee are available for public viewing on the County of Dufferin website at www.dufferincounty.ca.