

Council gets its first look at 2011 budget

Marg Zwart

In her 2011 preliminary budget overview, Clarington's Treasurer, Nancy Taylor, is projecting an 8.18 percent budget increase or \$82 per average home in Clarington.

Taylor outlined the 2011 budgetary pressures in a daylong budget session with senior staff and council members last Friday, at the Newcastle Recreation Centre. The budget estimates were based on maintaining current levels of service throughout the municipality.

A 3.25 percent salary increase for municipal staff accounts for \$586,000 or 1.6 percent of the budget increase. A significant increase of \$851,500 in premium costs for the employee health benefit plan accounts for 2.4 percent of the projected budget increase. An additional 2 percent, or \$700,000, is needed to bring Clarington's staffing levels up to par, according to Municipal CEO Frank Wu.

Compared with other Greater Toronto Area municipalities, Clarington is one of the leanest operations with 3.15 full-time employees per 1,000 population, according to Wu. Ajax has the same ratio as Clarington. The City of Oshawa has 5.84 full-time employees per 1,000 population, according to the statistics presented by Wu at Friday's meeting.

"No longer can I get department heads to squeeze more blood out of a stone in terms of getting them to do more, without it becoming demoralizing to staff," Wu stated.

Wu presented a four-year staffing plan which he asked councillors to approve during budget deliberations. The plan recommends hiring 27 full-time and 3 part-time employees over the next four years. Wu recommends nine new full-time employees and one part-time employee for 2011. Wu called his approach "conservative," and said he is asking for 2 percent of the budget (based on a projected growth of 2 percent for assessment) each year for new staff, which he would deploy where they were needed. The current system of coming to council each year with staffing requirements, according to Wu, does not make sense, and "is nonsense," he said.

"There are ways to massage this," stated Mayor Adrian Foster, "and still achieve what we need to." He suggested that hiring some of the new staff later in the year would have some savings on this year's budget. Yet he acknowledged, "The more we put things off, the harder it is to deal with."

Clarington's debt, which was \$32 million, last year, was a topic for discussion by numerous candidates in last year's municipal election.

According to Taylor, Clarington has always been careful and has only gone into debt for major infrastructure projects. Clarington's debt per capita is \$382, which according to Taylor, "is very much below what our debt limit is."

Taylor is recommending the municipality pay off the \$3.2 million debt on the Municipal Administration Centre/Bowmanville Library this year, by using reserve fund money. In her 2010 preliminary budget overview, Taylor indicated a 6.65 percent increase. Councillors whittled that down to a 2.97 percent tax increase.

Clarington's 2011 budget deliberations will take place on Friday, February 25, with the final budget to be approved at the March 7th council meeting.