

We look forward to hearing your news

## Town tax hike...

Continued from Page 1

"Burlington is coming in at three (per cent). Oakville is four and the Region 2.7. I think we're in the range of fairness," DeSousa said.

The budget includes \$280,000 (annualized) to hire eight full-time equivalent staff to try to meet the demands of a growing community. Staff burnout is reported in at least two departments, including the building, zoning, and enforcement. Councillors approved an additional \$61,800 for a municipal law enforcement officer, not recommended by the CAO, Steve Andrews. They also delayed dealing with a proposed \$97,800 expenditure to open the Georgetown library on Sundays.

Acton Councillor Clark Somerville is confident staff will come back with a three per cent increase, noting they spent more than five hours debating relatively small amounts of money.

"We agonize over the little dollars," Somerville said, adding staff answered any questions he had about the big, multi-million dollar items, before the meeting.

The starting point for a new base budget system had each department identify increases for fixed costs - materials, supplies, fuel - and then make requests for additional staff, programs and equipment purchases.

Those requests were vetted by CAO Steve Andrews, the treasurer and department heads and presented to the budget committee for debate, a system defended by Acton and Regional Councillor Rick Bonnette, who said they'd come a long way since his first budget debates 17 or 18 years ago.

"...Staff used to come in at a 28 per cent increase and it would be up to Council to cut it down to about eight per cent and that's when the real dog fights used to go on," Bonnette said.

Ward 2 Councillor Bryan Lewis questioned their accountability after initially asking staff for a budget with no more than a three per cent increase adding he had some "genuine concerns" with exceeding three per cent, and questioning his effectiveness as an advocate for rural programs when dust control pro-

grams for rural roads weren't included.

Mayor Kathy Gastle quickly head off any rural versus urban spending comparisons.

"We are fair around the table and I think in our capital forecast a lot of dollars were spent out in our rural area, so I wouldn't want to mislead the public that there's an unfairness here. I think we are very responsible and we have to balance everything, and it's not easy," Gastle said.

During the meeting councillors deleted \$10,000 for additional trees planting and \$24,000 for an organization review and added six items, including a last minute request from Mayor Gastle for \$8,000 for lights at the Georgetown skateboard park, an unbudgeted item that would add \$1 more to the tax bill.

Added to the budget were:

- \$3,000 for hire staff to prepare a heritage data base
- \$10,122 for increased urban lawn care and cutting
- \$8,605 for a part-time engineering and public works secretary
- \$61,800 for a bylaw enforcement officer
- \$8,060 to hire staff to run the municipal awards program
- \$5,000 for a Year of the Volunteer ceremony

Council is expected to approve the final budget on March 26.

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