

CH seeks 11% budget hike

By Stephanie Thiessen
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Conservation Halton (CH) is asking the Region to fork over about 11 per cent more funding than last year for its budget.

The budget was approved by the board of directors at a meeting November 30. It calls for \$4,495,794 from Halton Region, which is about a half a million more than the previous year.

It might seem like a large percentage, but CH chair Brian Penman said it's not a huge number of dollars and still makes up less than one per cent of the Region's budget.

And, he said, the support is necessary. "It's designed to bring us slowly and surely into a healthier situation."

The total amount of funding being requested by CH's supporting municipalities — which includes Halton and to a much smaller degree Peel, Hamilton and Puslinch — is \$4,933,797, subject to approval by the watershed municipal councils.

Municipal funding accounts for 24 per cent of CH's total funding in its 2007 budget. User fees make up the largest portion, with 43 per cent of the total funding.

CH's total expenditures outlined in the 2007 budget are \$20,234,735. That's an increase of about \$2.8 million over last

year, and includes the tax supported and non-tax supported programs.

The non-tax supported programs are the conservation areas and Glen Eden Ski and Snowboard Centre, which are supported largely by user fees. It was also recommended at the meeting that the 2007 Pay for Performance Policy percentage rates be adopted based on percentage rates of 0 to 4 per cent.

The 2007 budget report details that among the major expenses are a best practice recommendation that CH add 21 staff positions over three years. For 2007, eight staff positions have been added.

Also, watershed management capital structures are aging and need replacement and major upgrades.

Penman told The Champion the 2007 budget is a result of many meetings with the Region of Halton and that a strong relationship has been forged.

CH has been down a difficult road recently, Penman said, particularly after the Province "cut every conservation authority's budget in half" in 1996.

The environmental agency found itself with depleted reserves and no money for capital projects, he said.

Last year, the Region committed to upping its support by almost 25 per cent, which was

well needed, he said.

"They've agreed because of our situation that the Region would continue to support us in the double digits for a period of time," Penman said.

Mayor Gord Krantz wasn't at the meeting, but said he doesn't normally support increases over and above the rate of inflation.

"Would I support an 11 per cent increase? Not likely, unless there were circumstances so pressing the wheels are likely to fall off. I'm not sure that's the case," Krantz said.

He added many conservation authorities — including CH — are still trying to right themselves after the province cut their funding.

"We're still trying to play catch-up. Unfortunately, it's on the backs of the property tax base," he said, emphasizing the root cause of the larger-than-he'd-like increase isn't mismanagement on the part of CH.

Two board members present at the meeting — Bryan Lewis and Bob Inglis, both Halton Hills councillors — also opposed the municipal funding requested.

The budget will be presented to the Region of Halton in January.

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