

Regional budget passes

By Christina Commisso
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

In a budget that will see close to \$1 billion spent on infrastructure, programs, services, Regional staff and police, Halton's council was hung up on about \$190,000.

That amount represented the difference between capping Regional staff pay increases at 2.25 per cent, which was the amount decided upon during Monday's budget deliberations, or at 2 per cent, which some councillors deemed would bring public sector wages further in line with those in the private sector.

"Is it a lot of money, no. But we have to do something different. Public sector salaries have gotten out of line with the private sector," said Burlington Councillor Jack Dennison, who introduced the motion to decrease the cap during yesterday's regional council meeting.

Pointing to the still-recovering economy, he called the move "a pre-emptive strike."

Fellow Burlington Councillor Paul Sharman supported the motion, citing an imbalance in private and public sector wages and increasing poverty rates in Halton.

"It's time to get real and look at all levels of government and ask ourselves what are we trying to do to the public? Who is it that takes a stand on this? Where do we deliver a message? If not us, than who? If not now, then when?"

However, the majority around the council table were satisfied with the cap.

"This isn't a negotiation. We're not setting numbers in stone," said Oakville Councillor

Jeff Knoll. "We're stuck at a \$191,000 decision and who are we putting this on the shoulders of — our staff. It sets a tone."

Following a half-hour in-camera session, council reconvened and the motion to decrease the cap to 2 per cent was defeated, with Burlington councillors Dennison, Marianne Meed Ward, Sharman, John Taylor, Mayor Rick Goldring and Milton Mayor Gord Krantz voting in favour of the cap and the other 15 council members opposing it.

However, there was no divide when it came down to the approval of the Region's 2011 budget, which was unanimously passed during yesterday's meeting. Halton's 2011 operating budget will see more than \$700 million spent on costs, including police services and Regional staff, and the capital budget totals more than \$200 million.

While the Regional services budget represents a 0.2 per cent decrease from last year, the rising costs of policing and water and wastewater rates have offset that tax cut.

When combined with the 4.4 per cent increase in the Halton Regional Police Service budget, taxpayers will see an increase of 1.4 per cent on the total Regional property tax bill. For a household assessed at \$350,000, their 2011 taxes will increase about \$19 over last year.

The approved rate-supported water and wastewater budget for 2011 sees an increase of 4.1 per cent. For a typical household using 300 cubic metres of water a year, this equals an increase of about \$31 over 2010 levels.

— with files from Kim Arnott

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