

Public works hit hard by cuts

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"That's it!" exclaimed Ward 4 Coun. Peter Timmins who, along with other members of council, expressed disappointment in the token reduction in the policing budget.

"Why do we have over \$300,000 in increases?" said Ward 3 Coun. Paul Innes, asking for justification for the higher policing costs.

Council was told the increases were due mainly to the addition of four new constables hired in 2006 and the capital costs for two new vehicles, including a 4-wheel drive SUV requested for 2007.

"Everything in there was justifiable," said Ward 1 Coun. Randy Voakes, who reviewed the police budget as a member of the Police Services Board, along with Mayor Ron McDermott and resident Percy Dufour.

Because policing is regu-

lated under the Police Services Act, council declined to enforce cuts of their own to the police budget.

"They would just take it to arbitration," said Innes.

Comparing 2006 budgets, Essex policing costs were about \$3.9 million compared to \$2.5 million paid by the Town of Kingsville, who contract their police services from the Ontario Provincial Police - a difference of \$1.4 million.

Also contributing to budget increases was an increase in landfill tipping fees, with an average increase of 16.5 per cent. Effective March 1, tipping fees are \$50.5 per tonne for garbage, and \$39 per tonne for yard waste.

With the increased costs, council's efforts to reduce the municipal tax increase to 3 per cent or less meant deep cuts in other departments.



Reductions to the 2007 public works budget will affect sidewalks, bridges, culverts, tree removal and roadside ditching.

"Public Works is always on the hit parade when it comes to the budget," said Richard Beausoleil, the town's director of public works.

Public Work's projects removed from the budget include the reconstruction of Alice Street, a savings of over \$345,000, and demolition of the steel buildings from the silos, a savings of \$12,000.

In Ward 3, council removed the addition requested to the Ferriss Road salt shed, a savings of \$30,000, and postponed the resurfacing of Concession 3.

Other reductions to public works came in sidewalks, bridges, culverts, tree removal and roadside ditching. Council also asked to delay the hiring of a full-time public works labourer until September 2007.

Additional cuts were made to public works vehi-

cle requests.

"We have a lot of serious stuff," said Beausoleil, noting the impacts of the budget cuts to his department.

Council was shown the increases in the town's salaries and wages, up 6.7 per cent over last year, for a total expenditure of \$8.8 million.

A comparison of the 2007 budget to pre-amalgamation figures shows an increase in full-time staff from 67 in 1998 to 85 in 2007. The total cost of salaries and wages was just under \$4.8 million in 1998, about \$4 million less than the projected 2007 cost.

"It has gone up about \$2 million since 2004," said Ward 3 Coun. Ron Rogers.

Council members praised Treasurer Donna Hunter for "all the hard work" put into the draft budget.

A special budget meeting is tentatively scheduled for March 26.



Despite council's request for a reduction in the policing budget, savings of only \$20,500 could be found. The police budget currently stands at about \$4.25 million.

Fewer empty stores in downtown Essex

BY DANIEL SCHWAB

While some Essex residents and business owners are complaining about the town's numerous empty storefronts, the number of vacancies is actually lower than it was three years ago.

According to research conducted by the Downtown Study Committee, as of December 2004, there were 29 vacant commercial properties out of 195 units in downtown Essex.

There are currently about 23 vacancies, including the recent closure of Quiznos Sub, Godfather Pizza, Labonte School of Music and On the Go Hair Salon.

At the time of the 2004 study, Essex had far more

empty shops than some of the county's other urban centres. Belle River had seven, Amherstburg had 14 and Kingsville had five.

The committee determined that the vacancy rate in downtown Essex was "unusually high."

While not much has changed in three years, a handful of local businesses are expanding or revamping their façades.

Talbot Street's Wendy's Family Creations is now Wendy's, with a new logo and a new retail focus on fashion.

The Essex Animal Clinic will soon include a rehabilitation pool and underwater treadmill for dogs. The facility will be the only one of its kind in Essex County,

and will be housed within a 2,200 square foot expansion that will also feature an acupuncture room for pets.

Laundry Ex-Xperts on Gordon Avenue has also expanded, doubling its size. Customers will now have access to more folding tables and seating at the laundromat.

A new business, China 1 Chinese Restaurant, moved into its Talbot Street location, the site of the former Golden Palace, last week.

In the interest of keeping existing businesses in town, a subcommittee of the Business Improvement Area was formed last week.

The Business Retention Committee will deal directly with local businesses, providing aid to those expe-

riencing financial problems or a lack of focus, said BIA manager Marlene Markham.

The confidential committee will help businesses build a clientele, direct them to helpful government services or act as a liaison between owners and town council.

"People can come for help to try and keep their business here," Markham said. "If they are having landlord problems or are short on money or can't afford employees, we'll direct them."

The committee will be led by former Essex Home Hardware owner Ib Fynbo, who will be joined by volunteers from the business community, Markham said.

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