

Region freezes taxes, can't agree on reserves

BY PATRICK CASEY
Staff Writer

York Region council has ratified its \$817-million operating budget, but councillors remain uncertain whether to spend money from their swelling reserve funds.

On Thursday, council froze property taxes for the second consecutive year, thanks in large part to the region's surging growth. Assessment increased by 4.4 per cent, or \$16 million over last year.

However, with nearly \$19 million in working capital in reserves by the end of the year, plus another \$12 million in surplus funds, Markham Mayor Don Cousens reiterated his plan to dedicate a portion of those dollars to purchasing land on the Oak Ridges Moraine to save it from future housing development.

But Markham Regional Councillor Frank Scarpitti called Cousens' idea a duplication of the York Region Greening Initiative council passed last month, which allows for a land acquisition fund.

"We got it, we voted on it and we passed it," explained Scarpitti. "It relates not only to the Oak Ridges Moraine, but a number of greenland areas identified in York Region's official plan."

"I hope we are not revisiting the debate because we have agreed to do it already."

Scarpitti suggested the region's three hospitals deserve some of the reserve funds, especially since changes to the Development Charges Act in 1997 disqualified hospitals from receiving a portion of lot levies.

With construction plans identified totalling nearly \$80 million, hospital officials in Newmarket, Richmond Hill and Markham must raise \$28 million on their own by the end of June to qualify for \$65 million worth of capital funding from the province.

"The clock is ticking. The older we get, the more demand we put on the hospitals," said Scarpitti. "With changes to the development charges, it took away the ability for municipalities to include hospital capital costs."

"That was a big mistake. We need sewers and roads, but we also need hospital infrastructure. This is a chance for the region to come to the table. Hospitals can't fundraise for this type of dollars, they raise their money for new equipment. I don't mean to downplay the moraine, but health care is a big issue."

After council approved the budget, Georgina Mayor Rob Grossi failed in an attempt to have the budget re-opened to propose a tax cut.

"I can't see why we can't have a reduction this year. I would be pleased to have a reduction of at least 1 per cent," said Grossi. "Many of my constituents are at a hardship, they are at the end of the road."

Over the next two months, the region's finance committee will analyse options for reserve funds.

According to York Region treasurer Sandra Cartwright, reserves at the end of 2000 will total \$408 million, including \$189 million in unused development charges, another \$124.6 million in waste and water reserves, \$18.5 million in social assistance and another \$12 million in social housing funds.

But she warned against spending reserves, noting the funds should be bumped up further over the next two years as a safeguard against economic downturns.

"We will have nearly \$20 million in working capital reserves by the end of 2000, compared to \$4 million in 1997," said Cartwright. "On the surface, it looks like a healthy reserve, but we have identified a reserve fund of \$33 million based on this budget."

"With \$33 million in that reserve, it means we won't have to

borrow and incur interest rate charges."

Budget highlights include \$250 million in road, water and sewer capital programs, the redevelopment of the Newmarket Health Centre, advanced training for paramedics, 41 new police officers and a police helicopter unit that should be in the air next month.

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