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BUDGET: York politicians to vote on 1.94% increase

Tax hike would add \$40 to your regional tax bill

BY DAVID FLEISCHER
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Regional councillors must decide this month if they will move forward with a proposed 1.94-per-cent property tax increase.

The finance committee OK'd the budget Thursday, placing the onus on council for final approval at its March 24 meeting.

The proposed increase works out to just under \$40 this year on a \$400,000 home.

Much of the discussion around the committee table focused on a proposal by Newmarket Mayor Tony Van Bynen to raise the increase to 2.94 per cent, in the interests of paying off the region's sky-high debt.

"It could have a huge impact on the legacy we leave for the next generation," he said.

But most councillors were wary of burdening taxpayers at the tail end of a recession and regional chairperson Bill Fisch pointed out the region already contributes 7 per cent of its budget to long-term infrastructure replacement, which has the same impact as paying down debt.

"As much as I'd like the idea ... it just seems to me the wrong time to do it," he said.

Mr. Van Bynen agreed, adding council should revisit his proposal.

Councillors then spent about 30 minutes discussing a proposed \$260,000 addition to the \$780-million operating budget.

The money had been earmarked by the transportation committee for three hirings, including two to deal with nuisance signs on

regional streets. However, the committee voted to delay the hirings.

Georgina Mayor Rob Grossi questioned the expense, admitting while it might not be a lot of money in the big picture, the spending still seemed exorbitant.

York's nine municipalities are in various stages of approving their own budgets as Markham approved a tax freeze for a third straight year.

BUDGET HIGHLIGHTS

- York Regional Police hiring 28 more officers and 10 civilians

- No transit fare increase

- A pre-determined 10-per-cent hike in water and wastewater rates. A re-evaluation in the coming months could lead to even bigger increases next year.

- The opening of a new community environmental centre in Richmond Hill

- Six new mobility plus buses and 10 new YRT buses

- Rehabilitating 113 kilometres of regional roads

- Up to \$2.7 million to assist in the building of a new Toronto and Region Conservation Authority headquarters, contingent on the participation of other municipal partners

Bankrupt company costs region \$1M

Two years after the bankruptcy of a ticket kiosk chain, York Region has been forced to write off \$1 million.

More than 25 invoices to Infoplace, dating from late 2008 and early 2009, were written off by the finance committee Thursday.

Infoplace operated 135 kiosks Ontario-wide, including locations at Hillcrest Mall, Upper Canada Mall and Markville Shopping Centre. The company sold about 10 per cent of YRT's tickets at its outlets.

When Infoplace filed for bankruptcy in January 2009, York Region was owed more than \$1 million.

About \$100,000 in unsold tickets was recovered, but \$940,000 was lost.

The region was on a long list of creditors. Ottawa was owed \$2 million, Mississauga was out more than \$700,000 and Durham Region, Toronto, the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation and Revenue Canada were also creditors.

Mississauga continued to give tickets to Infoplace despite continued failure to pay bills, something that was not a problem in York Region.

YRT tickets and passes were been sold to Infoplace on a consignment basis, a practice that since been eliminated.

A full review and an audit by KPMG followed the collapse and the region now requires credit checks on private companies and expects cash on delivery, York Region audit director Paul Duggan said.

— David Fleischer

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