

## OPINION COLUMN

### Thinking outside box can cushion pains of change for Sault Ste. Marie

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SAULT STE. MARIE - We often hear about the concept of “thinking outside the box” or developing new ways to do the same old thing.

Thinking outside the box is a metaphor meaning to think differently, or from a new, creative perspective.

The catch phrase is one that has been used in recent years by city council, whether talking about developing new programs, finding new efficiencies or partnering with the private sector.

But sometimes different ways of thinking can be hard for some to accept and “outside the box” ideas meet resistance.

That's what the public saw last week.

A motion, moved by Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker and Ward 4 Coun. Rick Niro, asked city staff to develop a budget with a zero-per-cent increase over their 2017 approved budget, including a list of cost-saving options for council to consider to achieve that result. City departments have also been asked to provide a further list of potential cost-saving options to achieve a one-per-cent overall reduction from their 2017 approved budgets.

The “mock budget” will be presented to city council in November, not unlike the preliminary budget council received last year.

Sure, the exercise may put extra work on city staff – and potential recommendations or changes that in the end, may not be accepted by city council. Or, the exercise may provide councillors with the information that they need to talk to constituents and determine what will be best for the community in the future.

The exercise is a good one to complete. It's another check and balance that will determine whether every possible efficiency at city hall has been explored. It will ensure that services are not duplicated. Most importantly, it will provide city council with a clearer picture of where budget money is being spent and where city staff believes any savings can be achieved.

Council will ultimately still need to be the decision makers and determine whether the recommendations – some, all or none – should be accepted. Those recommendations will likely include a full examination of whether programs, services or other areas can be trimmed, and whether the community can make do with less.

The test will be to determine how many taxpayers use the program, whether a reduced version is appropriate or whether they will want to pay more for it.

Ward 2 Coun. Sandra Hollingsworth is correct when she said making an \$800,000 cut on budget night is difficult without having the time to consider all options.

While some argued that the timing of the resolution is not right and it is too early to consider such a move, that argument isn't very strong. That argument is being considered only in light of an expected decision about whether a judge will order Essar Steel Algoma to pay its post-filing property taxes to the City of Sault Ste. Marie. The theory is that this work won't need to be done if the city receives its property tax money from the steel mill.

However, the better argument is that by providing ample time for staff to complete the report, more options can be considered since there is no rush to complete the process to meet a tight deadline.

This resolution does not have to be tied to the property tax issue. It's simply another method of ensuring that taxpayers' money is spent wisely.

It was also suggested that a “zero increase” is more than just that because of rising costs. That's fair. But the challenge is for senior staff to achieve that “zero per cent” and squeeze a little more out of what they receive to run their departments. Predeterminations as to whether staff can achieve the goal should not be made. Again, council will have the final word at budget deliberations.

Change is difficult for everyone. But in order to develop and grow Sault Ste. Marie, change is necessary, and with that comes thinking outside the box.

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