



NEWS LOCAL

Council looking ahead to budget deliberations

By Elaine Della-Mattia, Sault Star

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City council is getting ready to sharpen its pencil as it prepares for Monday's budget deliberations.

The bottom line is a lot more palatable than that first presented in previous years, with an anticipated increase of about 2.02 per cent.

“It’s a good starting point,” said Mayor Christian Provenzano.

The budget reflects the strong decisions city council has made over the past few years and the hard work staff has put in on council’s behalf, he said.

Provenzano said he doesn’t want to see the budget cut significantly or council increase spending.

“I want us to continue to be disciplined in our decision making and certainly I want to hear what everyone’s views are,” he said.

The first-term mayor said his priority will be to find the additional \$150,000 planning staff are looking for to leverage for the downtown initiative but he doesn’t want to see that money come from the levy.

“The downtown is something that is enjoyed by everybody and it is the heart of our city and I’d like to see some improvements there a little quicker,” he said.

Several councillors have also indicated a willingness to consider injecting more money into the downtown.

Last month, the city’s planning department requested that council earmark another \$150,000 for the downtown initiative. The money would be leveraged with applications to higher levels of government and used to implement action items found in the report.

Ward 1 Coun. Steve Butland is also pleased with the starting numbers.

“It’s a nice start, an unusual good start,” he said.

Butland is hoping the mild weather and lack of snow to date will present an additional benefit to the budget that hasn’t yet been factored in to the equation.

But Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker said he will challenge his colleagues to do more.

Shoemaker requested that staff also show the numbers with no increase and with a one per cent decrease. While that budget form has not been released to city council yet, Shoemaker expects to see a response to his resolution Monday.

“When I campaigned in 2014 I said we should not be increasing taxes above the rate of inflation. If we see something around the two per cent mark, then we’re not far off,” he said.

But Shoemaker won’t be satisfied with those numbers.

“I think that means we should take the opportunity to look at where we are spending and see if we can reduce the budget’s operational costs so that there is money for some of the things the residents want,” Shoemaker said.

Those things could include dedicating more money to a splash pad to improve the quality of life, investing more money to improve the city's downtown or dedicating more funds to the economic development fund to position the city for growth, he said.

Shoemaker said that he firmly believes it is time for the city to also conduct an in-depth review on the city's public works and transportation department, the only service area that has not had a complete review.

"I really think we need to look at those operations and determine if there are savings to be had," he said.

For instance, Shoemaker wants to see the city's garbage collection system reviewed to determine if there is a better structure that will save taxpayers money. He plans on introducing a motion asking for a cost comparison in waste collection at a future meeting.

"I've raised a few motions that would see a review of PWT done and they've all been turned down. We've made extensive changes to our other departments and I hope this budget will give council some impetus to look at these reviews they have been reluctant to do," Shoemaker said.

Coun. Susan Myers also has a few ideas where she hopes to get the support of council for some additional spending.

Myers said she believes the Canadian Heritage Bushplane Museum should be rewarded for their efforts to grow and generate revenue by granting them their \$65,000 funding request.

Ward 4 Coun. Rick Niro agreed.

"They're doing a good job and they're doing their part to raise revenue and I think that requires some recognition on our part," he said.

Myers is also hoping that the some money can be found to help the Sault Ste. Marie Museum to expand their self-funding options while Niro said he'll consider the reimplementation of the summer leaf and yard waste pick up, something that could add about \$60,000 to the budget.

But Ozzie Grandinetti said any increase is just too much for taxpayers to face right now.

The Ward 6 councillor still wants to "pick away" at the budget and get to a zero increase.

"We are not in a financial situation to spend extra money and our taxpayers can't afford it," he said. "I cannot accept a rate increase this year."

Grandinetti wants to see the city hire a consultant to do a complete audit on the city's budget. He said that was done in another community in southern Ontario and resulted in a more than one million of annual savings.

"It might be the little things we're missing, like mailing out paystubs, or not being as efficient as we can," he said.

Council will begin its 2018 budget deliberations at 4:30 p.m. Monday.

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