
OPINION COLUMN

Councillors can be more demanding of staff

By Elaine Della-Mattia, Sault Star
Tuesday, December 5, 2017 7:54:34 EST PM



QMI AGENCY FILE

City councillors were right Monday to be disappointed with staff's response to a May resolution requesting that each department develop a budget without any increase or with a one per cent decrease.

Sure, from a staff standpoint, the argument is that city operations have been restructured and are cut to the bone. The lean and mean operational department heads don't want to see cuts that will impact service levels, or more importantly, their own jobs.

But they have a responsibility to council and, ultimately as public servants, a responsibility to taxpayers.

As councillors Matthew Shoemaker, Paul Christian and Rick Niro, so ably pointed out, it's not staff's jobs to make the cuts. But as "experts" in their departments, they certainly have the ability to prioritize where the cuts would hurt the least and provide reasoning behind their thought process.

Niro had the right attitude. He wanted to be able to discuss with council where potential cuts could be made that offset any additional spending approved by council. If that was done, the budget would still hover around that two per cent mark.

But other councillors were willing to take the easy way out and be satisfied with the two per cent increase.

It was made quite clear that only half of that increase comes from internal city operations. The other half is uncontrollable and set by outside agencies and levy boards that council has no control over.

Ironically, it took a little more than one hour to debate the resolutions that Shoemaker put on the floor that would result in savings in the budget and only 10 minutes to add to the budget from the supplemental list provided to council for their consideration.

Shoemaker was the only city councillor to raise specific resolutions that resulted in cost saving in the budget.

He said he took the lists that had been provided in the previous two years that had never been enacted upon and raised those he believed would be accepted by council. He also penned resolutions based on a report to council regarding waste collection. The results were savings of \$180,000.

It was surprising that other city councillors did not have any cost saving ideas to present on their own.

Ward 2 Coun. Sandra Hollingsworth continuously asks staff to develop creative ways to cost save. Perhaps council needs to heed the advice.

It's not enough for city council to be happy with the two per cent increase. Not raising ideas or potential cost-saving measures is being too complacent and taxpayers have not elected council to sit idly by.

Next week, Shoemaker will present the same resolution again asking staff to come back with a list of possible savings and the impact they will have on services for next year's budget.

This time, he wants the departmental responses back before council in the spring so if they are not on the right track, staff has time to go back to the drawing board before the budget process begins in earnest again in the fall.

It's almost too bad Shoemaker, Niro or Christian, didn't halt the budget process Monday night, giving staff time to return with a list of possible cuts that could be deliberated Tuesday night. Maybe then, the .993 per cent increase attributed to internal departments could have been reduced even a little further to help the taxpayers.

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