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NEWS LOCAL

Council freezes wages for non-union staff

By Elaine Della-Mattia, Sault Star

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The 127 non-unionized employees who work for the City of Sault Ste. Marie will not get a pay raise until 2018.

In what they repeatedly called a tough decision, city council voted in favor of freezing the salary of non-unionized employees until Jan. 1, 2018.

The move will result in a savings of \$227,395 for the 2017 budget, an amount more significant than some councillors had expected.

Ward 1 Steve Butland was the only councillor who voted against the pay freeze, something he said he had to do out of principle and his "background" he told council, referring to his New Democratic political roots.

Three other councillors were absent from the meeting – Ward 2's Sandra Hollingsworth, Ward 4's Lou Turco, and Ward 6 Joe Krmpotich.

Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker, mover of the resolution, said it was incumbent on city council to find cost savings during the tough economic times and the expected significant shortfall for the 2017 budget.

Salaries of all city employees make up about 53% of the budget. Council has no control over some salaries including those employees who work in the police and fire departments.

Shoemaker said similar salary freezes were ordered by the provincial and federal governments during the 2009-10 recession.

In Sault Ste. Marie, he argued, "we are economically in the worse shape we have been in a significant period of time."

He urged council to support the resolution, one he agreed was difficult.

Ward 5 Coun. Frank Fata said the resolution didn't go far enough. He wanted to see all staff – union and non-union – take a pay freeze.

But Mayor Christian Provenzano said the city was bound by law to fulfill its collective agreements and those agreements cannot be changed.

He also noted the community size is shrinking.

"I don't think city hall can be insulated from the challenges that are in the community," he said. "If our community isn't growing, our municipality bureaucracy shouldn't be growing."

Provenzano said he supports the resolution because the lion's share of the city budget is human resource costs, a factor which has been growing annually and he fears those costs which are going to outpace the ability of taxpayers to pay for it.

Ward 1 Coun. Paul Christian called the move "a tough decision" but one that was part of city council's need to "peck away" at the budget.

Susan Myers, ward 2 councillor, said she went through a similar move during the 1990s "Ray Days" era but believes that the staff understand the reasons why this has to be done.

"They are part of this community," she said.

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