

Council approves tax hike of 0.75% for increased service enhancements

By Mark Pavilonis Editor

The Township of King has approved a 0.75-per-cent increase for additional service enhancements in the Township's portion of the 2022 Budget, maintaining the base tax increase of zero per cent. King's operating budget for 2022 is \$47.3 million and the capital budget is \$56.4 million for a total budget of \$103.7 million. Township council approved the budget at the Nov. 15 council meeting. The average increase for the Township portion of municipal tax works out to 1.11% between 2018 and 2022. The 2022 budgets will give residents some enhanced services, while still toying the line on keeping increases near zero. Staff delivered their 2022 Operating Budget and Business Plans, with an initial .16% tax hike. A move led by Mayor Steve Pellegrini saw the increase inch up to .75% to include some added services and additional funds set aside for the new Township Wide Recreation Centre. Roughly \$127,000 extra is being allocated to the centre, with further contributions earmarked in 2023 and 2024. Council also opted to direct a little over \$100,000 towards a permit coordinator, hiring a part-time student for horticulture, weekend staff at Cold Creek and winter maintenance of trails and pathways. The Township reached out to residents for their input, hosting an online public information session and gathering input through an online survey before proposing the increase to council. Council directed staff to keep the 2022 increase as close as possible to zero per cent to continue supporting taxpayers during the pandemic, while still offering quality services. The Township portion of King's annual property tax funds operating budgets to fund current service levels, programs, and services as well as capital infrastructure. This includes snow removal from roads and sidewalks, road and bridge repairs and maintenance, fire and emergency services, parks, arenas, facilities and library branches. Some major capital projects include the Township-Wide Recreation Centre, \$75.8 million (2018-2024); bridge and culvert rehabilitation, \$2 million a year; Tasca Community Park, Phase 2, \$1.4 million; Cold Creek Conservation Area restoration, \$650,000; Osin Community Park, \$542,000; trail development, \$200,000 (2022 and 2023). At King Township, we recognize the challenges taxpayers have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. That is why council instructed staff to find a way to achieve a zero-per-cent tax impact in the Township portion of the 2022 budget with 0.75 per cent in service enhancements. Our King team responded with a budget that continues to offer a great quality of life here in King. Our Township has a tradition of keeping the Township portion of taxes low. King leads the way in the GTA with an average 1.11-per-cent increase over the past five years, said Mayor Steve Pellegrini. He added that council is extremely respectful of residents' hard-earned tax dollars during these unprecedented times. The enhancements are what residents have come to expect, he said. In creating the budget, staff found more than \$500,000 in efficiencies through reducing paper, lower consulting fees, purchasing equipment instead of leasing, and more. The mayor observed that staff turned over every rock to find loose change, in terms of efficiencies. Daniel Kostopoulos, CAO, said he's pleased with how the finance team and all departments found savings to support residents during the COVID-19 pandemic, approving a zero-per-cent increase in 2021 and maintaining the base tax increase of zero per cent for 2022. This will increasingly be a challenge as we experience the impact of record-breaking inflation rates of more than four per cent. The Township is facing increasing costs in the materials we buy, construction project costs, daily operation that includes fuel and electricity, and the decreased availability and increased costs of buying or renting vehicles for Township business. We will need to fully assess the impact of inflation on Township services and ensure we are prepared for the future, he noted. While councillors may have been reluctant at first, they all believed the minor increase was responsible. Councillor Debbie Schaefer said she had sticker shock over the new Recreation Centre but agreed putting aside funds, and providing extra services were warranted. Councillor David Boyd said council has made bold decisions to hold the tax increases at zero and in many areas, the Township simply had to do without. He said residents have a certain expectation and this budget delivers. The typically frugal Councillor Bill Cober also said saving for the Recreation Centre was responsible. He likened it to buying a new house, but not having enough money to buy furniture. Final taxes will include the portion from York Region and the school boards. The budget presentation details are posted on King's website at king.ca/budget.