

Fine-tuning a budget is never easy

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Every year our esteemed local politicians and staff set about a laborious and delicate task of creating a multi-million-dollar game plan for this municipality.

Regardless of the upper-level expertise, it's never easy and the process is fraught with hurdles, pitfalls and ramifications. It's a delicate balance between bottom line economics and the wants and needs of a growing population.

Not unlike a large business, King Township has to be frugal and manage its revenue to please the majority of its 21,000 shareholders. Just how do you do that?

This year, council approved its 2015 business plan with a 2.97% increase. Blended with other levels of government, the impact to local homeowners is likely to be around 2.69%. This will add an average of \$156 to your property tax bill (based on an assessment of \$614,000). You can add another \$47 for increased charges for water and waste water rates if you're on municipal services.

This increase is in keeping with neighbouring municipalities in the GTA and is comparable to the 2.59% King levied in 2014.

Nearby Caledon has tabled its preliminary budget with a tax hike of 4.7%.

The Township has to provide certain services and they want to ensure residents get those. They also want to sock some money away for that proverbial rainy day. And, if there is any money left over, they can accommodate internal and external wish lists.

Councillors debated for hours during the last council meeting, trying to find ways to cut \$200,000 in order to bring in a tax hike below 3%. It wasn't easy.

This year, Fire Chief Jim Wall wanted sprinklers in the fire halls. Sounded reasonable, but considered non-essential.

Input from residents indicate that roads are a priority so the Township listened and has earmarked funds for that. Not only does it take a great deal of money to maintain this rural municipality's roads, but it takes equipment; very expensive equipment.

Residents want their recreation facilities maintained another costly proposition.

New this year is the addition of a communications staffer for the municipality. Some may see this as a luxury, but Councillor Avia Eek pointed out King is the only municipality in the N6 of York without one. Most municipalities in the GTA have a communications department that handles of multitude of tasks, not the least of which is dealing with the public and disseminating information. Councillors and staff believe this will be an improvement and elevate King even further in its evolution.

Councillors, who are paid part-time wages often for full-time work, have to be bookkeepers, accountants, cheerleaders and advocates, all within the confines of a relatively small budget.

Mayor Pellegrini noted that staff should be commended for proposing a budget and business plan that strikes an appropriate balance between maintaining existing service level standards, while also ensuring that steps are being taken to implement a sustainable fiscal strategy that will support long-term renewal of existing and planned future municipal infrastructure requirements. King is bolstered by increased assessment growth from both residential and business investment.

They have to act smartly and efficiently, and considering the accomplishments in the past term, they have.

The public placed their faith in their elected councillors and re-instated a mayor without a contest.

Our leaders don't take this stamp of approval lightly and all have vowed to continue the good fight and to continue making improvements.

The fruits of their labour will pay off.

We've already seen a lot of development in the past year, and there's more to come.

Most of it has met all standards, community guidelines and received public approval. A few contested projects have reached compromises.

A lot of what council and staff do is to prepare us for the future. They want King to remain the jewel in the northern GTA and to do that, a lot of groundwork has to take place.

Even the baby steps taken today will pay dividends down the road. And it's not easy for taxpayers to see that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, especially when they open their tax bills.

But councillors, and many Township staffers, are residents and homeowners, too, so they share the pain.

Let's not forget that budgets are fluid documents, much like all governing master plans and strategies. They set the course, but are subject to change.

King, like many other municipalities, had to dish out money unexpectedly in early 2014 to deal with the ice storm damage and they have yet to receive provincial compensation.

Granted, few emergencies topped this one.

Creating a long-term business plan takes a huge, coordinated effort by all departments.

Everyone has to know the state of their hard assets (buildings, fire trucks, graders). They have to know what needs to be done and what can wait.

The public has to place their faith in their municipal government for leading with the best of intentions and making sound decisions.

While it's easy to criticize and complain, we need to cut them the slack they need, or our entire democratic system fails.

That's not to say we're perfect or that things can't be improved. Sure they can.

The onus is on the public to be aware, engaged and motivated to ask the tough questions. We need frank, open discussions about issues facing the municipality and a forum to exercise our rights.

We have it.

The process is open and councillors and senior staff are accessible and even willing to respond to public inquiries.

Taxpayers are not isolated and while they may feel powerless at times, the truth is they yield a great deal of power. The recent municipal election is proof of that.

Some great ideas arose out of honest discussions and debates that took place.

Hopefully, residents, and those who ran for office, will apply their enthusiasm to helping to make King better.

Ultimately, that should be everyone's goal.