

Nepean/Barrhaven EMC

No big new promises in draft city budget

Posted Nov 1, 2012 By Laura Mueller

EMC news - The City of Ottawa's "stay the course" draft budget means the average homeowner in the urban area would pay an extra \$67 on the municipal portion of their tax bill next year.

It's the smallest tax increase in six years and at 2.09 per cent, it falls below city council's commitment to keep tax hikes at 2.5 per cent each year.

As the mayor indicated before the budget was released, it's a plan that mostly sees city services maintained and the continuation of existing projects, but not a lot of new spending.

"There are many items contained in budget 2013 that will assist citizens in each and every ward and each and every neighbourhood right across this wonderful city," Mayor Jim Watson said during his lengthy speech to council before tabling the budget.

While the city had been on the hunt for a new, larger location for the well-used Emerald Plaza library branch, the library will stay where it is and expand into a neighbouring part of the shopping centre, almost doubling in size to about 930 square metres.

The library wasn't scheduled for an expansion until 2015, but when space opened up in the mall, Knoxdale-Merivale Coun. Keith Egli made the case to jump at the opportunity before it was too late.

"It's very well used and it's bursting at the seams. It's absolutely where it needs to be, but it needs more space," Egli said.

The project would be completed in 2013 and it would also include a new radio-frequency identification (RFID) sorting system. The city began switching libraries to the more modern system last year to free up staff to offer programs rather than sort books.

Other projects include community design plans promised for areas around future light rail stations that would be funded to the tune of \$300,000.

Two new city plans approved last year - the Older Adult Plan and the Arts, Heritage and Culture Plan - will get \$500,000 and \$1 million respectively towards their implementation.

The city plans to boost funding to fight the emerald ash borer by \$975,000, bringing annual funding for pesticide treatments and replanting to \$1.8 million.

There is also money for 16 new crossing guards.

After public consultations, city council is set to approve the budget on Nov. 28.

TRANSPORTATION

Of course, the major transportation project in 2013 will be the start of construction on the first section of the city's \$2.1-billion light-rail transit system, including a tunnel under the downtown.

The city is proposing to sprinkle \$4.9 million worth of traffic-signal changes around the city. There will be some new signals and alterations to existing ones, and additional audible signals for the vision impaired.

A plan to build a grade-separated crossing underneath Terry Fox Drive and a new Transitway section between Terry Fox Station and Didsbury Road is moving forward. More preliminary work will be done in 2013, with construction slated to start in 2014 in conjunction with the Earl Grey underpass construction to minimize construction impact.

There's also money to put towards the proposed park-and-ride lot at Innovation Drive in the Kanata Business Park.

The city will "fill in a crucial gap" for cyclists along the Sawmill Creek pathway between Walkley Road and Brookfield Road to provide a better connection to Hogs Back and the Rideau Canal pathway system, Watson

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File

The city plans to boost funding by \$975,000 to fight the emerald ash borer, bringing annual funding for pesticide treatments and replanting to \$1.8 million.

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Jim Watson

said.

Small segments of sidewalks are slated to be added on Lombardo Drive, along Colonnade Road in front of Viewmount Park, along Brookfield Road from Clover Street to the multi-use pathway east of Traverse Drive.

New traffic signals are proposed for Carling Avenue at Andrew Haydon Park, Holly Acres at the Trans Canada Trail and on Baseline Road at Villa Marconi (Farlane Boulevard) - something that excited Knoxdale-Merivale Coun. Keith Egli and College Coun. Rick Chiarelli.

A new audible crossing signal is proposed for March Road at Teron/Richardson. Pedestrian countdown signals will be added at Terry Fox Road and Maple Grove Road, Richmond Road and John Sutherland Drive, Centrepointe Drive and Tallwood Drive, Baseline and Cordova Street, Baseline east of Cedarview Road, Fisher Avenue/Dynes Road at Deer Park Road and at Perth and Fowler streets at Nixon Farm Drive in Richmond.

The city has put aside money to move the snow storage area at Maple Grove. A new location should come before council for a decision in November.

SOCIAL SERVICES

The city has to grapple with a "dark cloud on the horizon" when it comes to social services, the mayor said. That's because the provincial government is clawing back \$7.15 million for discretionary benefits and the Community Start Up fund.

That money goes towards a number of services for the most vulnerable residents of the city, including glasses and funerals for people on disability or financial assistance and emergency hydro and rent payments to prevent people from becoming homeless.

"I'm concerned and I'm also not happy about it," Watson said.

While the city did receive an additional \$5 million from the provincial government this year thanks to ongoing "uploading" payment to reclaim the costs of social programs at the provincial level, that money basically had to be redirected to make up for the discretionary funding shortfall, Watson said.

SAVINGS

A lot of budget savings will continue to come from the Service Ottawa project, which aims to consolidate city services. In 2013, that will mean \$8.8 million in savings from putting more services online, such as permit applications.

City treasurer Marian Simulik applauded the city's ability to slash another 139 full-time positions from its payroll, but later clarified that only 42 of the city's 14,489 jobs were cut this year. The rest were eliminated previously, but were tracked in terms of dollars, meaning the jobs themselves remained on the books. Still, the last two years have marked the first time since 2002 that the city actually eliminated jobs to save money - \$3.5 million this year. Many of those jobs were at the Nepean Equestrian Park, which the city decided to close in 2012.

Office expenses for the mayor and councillors will continue to be frozen.

DEBT

The city's debt level is now sitting at \$1.4 billion and the mayor said that figure won't be increasing this year.

The debt represents around 10 per cent of the cost of the city's \$15 billion worth of capital assets. The city borrows money to build that kind of infrastructure in order to spread the cost over the asset's lifetime to ensure the people who are using it also pay for it.

Servicing the city's debt accounts for about five per cent of the city portion of a individual's tax bill, the city treasurer said.

Ottawa's debt is the second lowest per capita debt (\$1,537) compared to Toronto, Montreal, Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver, the mayor said.

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