

By Terry Pender, Record staff Thu Nov 08 2012 07:31:00 0 Comments 5 Recommend

Ash tree pest casts long shadow over city budget

KITCHENER — A little bug you never see is about to eat a big hole in the city's 2013 capital budget.

When city councillors meet Thursday to consider spending \$91 million next year on new and existing infrastructure the Emerald Ash Borer will cast a long shadow.

City staff recommends spending \$4.3 million during the next 10 years to remove ash trees killed or weakened by the pest, which first invaded the Windsor area in 2001. It has steadily spread across southern Ontario since then.

That figure does not include replacing the lost trees with new ones at an estimated expense of \$6.75 million.

The cutting down of most of the city's ash trees and planting a new trees could total more than \$11 million during the next 10 years. The tax rate would have to be increased by 11 percentage points to raise the funds.

"It's scary when you think about it," Coun. Scott Davey, who chairs the finance committee and budget talks, said.

"We don't really have any choice because we are going to have trees on city streets that will be in danger of falling over so we have to fund it," Davey said. "It's not a sexy expense that councils like to spend money on, but it is a responsible expense."

City councillors will have about \$3 million available as it wraps up the environmental action fund.

"Now that would apply to areas that have environmental impacts," said Davey, and the bulk of that should go to community trails and the Ash borer infestation.

The Emerald Ash Borer is among several issues city councillors will try to fund in the capital budget. The others include \$6.3 million during the next 10 years for implementing the Trails Master Plan. Plus another \$8.25 million for upgrades to Huron Natural Area, McLennan Park and Victoria Park.

Mary Sehl, who chairs the city's cycling advisory committee, said the budget is not a done deal at this point and if people want the trails master plan implemented they should tell their city councillor.

"My thinking is it is really incumbent on us as a committee and members of the public concerned about trails to get out and let council know we consider this a priority," Sehl said.

When city council approved a new trails master plan earlier this year it was clear the city is behind other southern Ontario cities in building trails.

A complete and connected trail system is viewed as a priority for urbanists for safe, healthy, lively and sustainable cities. Trails encourage cycling and walking, increasing the numbers of people outdoors, and making the areas safer for everyone. They can effect a reduction in car use, which eases congestion and improves air quality.

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The 2013 capital budget:

- \$90.9 million in total spending proposed.
- Most of that — \$65.6 million — slated for infrastructure projects.
- \$5.9 million new underground-parking garage for the block next to City Hall.
- \$3.9 million full reconstruction regional/city streets.
- \$8 million full reconstruction city streets.
- \$1.3 million resurfacing existing streets.
- \$2.1 million new firefighting equipment.

City of Kitchener's capital budget



Emerald Ash Borer beetle

Handout

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