

Bancroft water and sewer rates to increase

By Jim Eadie

Water and wastewater was back on the agenda March 13 for Bancroft council.

Council had agreed to a staff recommended 2.5 per cent rate increase in February, half what was recommended by the Watson report for 2018. Faced with new and unsettling information however, it approved a five per cent increase at the meeting instead.

‘That [staff recommendation] was prior to the most recent knowledge we have. There are additional capital requirements now?’ and staff is not agreeing with their initial recommendation,’ said CAO Hazel Lambe.

More unexpected deficiencies have surfaced within the last two weeks that have changed their minds. Lambe said the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change ‘provided [the town] with an order’ to install a bypass flow meter to comply with regulations.

That will cost \$9,400 in 2018, she said. The plant's aerobic digester also needs to be rehabilitated ‘as soon as weather permits.’

‘There is a large mass in the tank, and it needs to be emptied and completely cleaned during the season when [the ministry] allows sludge to be spread on fields,’ said Lambe.

She said the ‘very expensive repair’ would cost a little more than \$48,000.

‘There are also expenditures outside the Watson report for necessary fuel and exhaust stack work on the pumping stations the bring them into compliance?’ \$16,460.’

The new total of unexpected capital expenditures outside of the Watson report for 2018 is just short of \$74,000.

‘We must err on the side of caution’ that is our mandate to the public,’ said Councillor Mary Kavanagh.

‘I agree,’ said Councillor Wayne Wiggins. ‘We have to follow the recommendations of staff. But out of consideration, there is the emergency fund of \$20,000.’

‘Until last week we thought the 2.5 per cent increase was doable,’ said Kavanagh. ‘But now with the new information ... that is untenable.’

‘I am not confident that the five per cent is ever going to cover those costs,’ said Lambe. She estimated the increase would amount to an extra \$12 on the bimonthly bill of an average four-person home.

‘We still acknowledge that this is unacceptable,’ said Mayor Paul Jenkins. ‘We are also still looking for the sources of infiltration.’ Jenkins is referring to water entering sewage lines and then being treated as sewage.

‘Camera imaging has identified 13 to 15 target areas within our lines where there are sags or require relining rehabilitation,’ said Lambe. ‘We will put out request for proposals for portable flow meters in the wet season to see where the water is coming in the greatest amounts.’

Council passed the five per cent increase for water and wastewater beginning with the next billing. In addition, council approved a fund of \$20,000 annually to top up to Hastings County Social Services assistance for residents struggling to pay their water bills.

Council tables Bancroft Financial Indicator Review

Steve Seller, a representative of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, brought the Bancroft Financial Indicator Review report to council.

The report is based on municipal financial information. It, along with other reports, provides the provincial government with information to help calculate grants, develop policy and helps to monitor the financial status of municipalities.

‘Municipalities can use this information for looking at year to year comparisons, trends, course corrections?’ land use, strategic planning and asset management decisions,’ said Seller. The report looks at seven indicators that are challenges to municipalities.

‘Tax arrears restrain the ability of a municipality to operate,’ said Sellers. ‘You still have to pay the county, and the school boards for example.’

Bancroft's level of challenge remains high, but not increasing.

‘Net financial debt also remains high, but the trend is improving,’ said Sellers.

Other areas of operation including reserves, cash on hand, debt service costs, asset consumption ratio and operating surplus ratio are moderate to low level of challenge.

‘Bancroft has an older population, low average income and low assessments, and that constrains municipal income,’ said Seller.

‘That leaves Bancroft with a high level of challenge. This is not a report card but is intended to provide information over time.’