

Reserves down and taxes up in Wollaston Township

By Bill Kilpatrick

At the March 27 special meeting of Wollaston council, the treasurer, Tracy Vader presented council with a revised draft budget that was recommending a 9.5 per cent increase in property taxes, down from a high of 62 per cent that was initially proposed back in November 2023. Vader began her presentation by stating that, "Staff throughout all departments have worked diligently on the preparation of the draft 2024 Wollaston Township budget. Council received a report from staff during the Nov 14, 2023 regular meeting of council seeking direction on numerous items for the 2024 budget. During a special meeting of council on Nov. 22, 2023 staff presented the preliminary draft budget and on Feb. 6 council members met individually with staff to provide input, seek clarification, and discuss the draft budget. There have been numerous changes made to the original preliminary document." Before Vader began her presentation the CAO Steven Potter asked for general questions from council. The first question came from Councillor J.D. Fentie who inquired about the reserve levels at the municipality. Vader pointed out that the audited 2022 numbers had the reserve levels at \$2,693,860, the 2023 unaudited numbers are \$2,224,398, and Vader's estimate for 2024 based on the current budget will see the reserves drop even lower to \$2,127,660, but as Vader pointed out that number does not take into account any surplus or deficit from 2023. According to Vader some of the items that were having a major impact on the budget were the Ontario Municipal Partnership Fund that will remain at the same level as 2023 at \$964,700, the corporate management consultant fees that are expected to more than double from an actual cost in 2023 of \$24,411.99 to an estimated \$56,000.00 in 2024, and staff salaries that went up from \$1.5 per hour to \$2.5 per hour in some cases with the new collective agreement. To offset some of the expenditures Vader is recommending transferring \$25,632 from working capital reserves and \$71,106 from the fire reserves. According to Vader the capital transfers will go to paying for things like the Nellie Lund Park survey, new computer equipment and software, banners for the town, a dusk-till-dawn light at the landfill along with a concrete pad as well. The fire transfers will go to a new fire alarm, training, the new pumper truck purchased from Limerick Township, and multiple new self-contained breathing apparatuses. When the discussion about consultant fees came up Vader pointed out that although she was looking at budgeting \$56,000 for 2024, council had already spent \$41,000 of that budgeted amount. Vader suggested that council increase that amount to avoid being in a deficit position. Councillor Wendy Mortimer asked Vader, "Do you have a more realistic number that you suggest we put in there?" Vader responded, "I don't, I just know that I have to have an asset management plan update and I spoke to the auditor who said that in most townships it costs around \$15,00. Keep in mind our current clerk/CAO's wages come out of that line item too so that's a council decision. I'm not privy to that information. I just know that we're sitting at over \$40,000 of expenditures as of March 22." Mortimer then asked Vader again, "but you can't propose a number?" Vader again responded, "I can't because I'm not part of your council discussions to determine the contract for the CAO. I can tell you that \$15,000 is needed for asset management plan updates, but you have to keep in mind that our CAO/clerk's wages, his contract, comes out of that line item too. I'm not privy to those discussions so I can't provide any input. I just wanted to bring that to your attention because you're budgeting a deficit on that line item." Mortimer then asked the treasurer again, "What amount would it take to have you feel that we were not budgeting a deficit?" And Vader replied, "Again, I'm not part of the discussions to deal with the contract issue so I can't speak to that." At this point Councillor Paul Ordanis put a motion forward to increase the consultant line item to \$72,000 and it was seconded by Mortimer. The amount was changed to \$71,000 and the motion passed, bringing the total tax increase, at that point in the meeting, up to 10.38 per cent from 9.5 per cent. Council explored numerous ways to increase revenue for the township. One suggestion put forward by Mortimer was a motion to increase the tipping fees at the landfill as per a previous recommendation by the public works superintendent Kirk McCaw. Mortimer did not have a specific number that she put forward, but Potter suggested that McCaw's recommendation, that was not specified at the meeting, be brought back to council for consideration and the bylaw could potentially be updated at a later time. Ordanis raised some concerns about getting input from McCaw and the bag tag program, "I'm just a little concerned that we might want to do a bit of a deeper dive with respect of how we are going to do an increase and get some input from Kirk with respect to what percentage he would think would be appropriate. And we've had some concerns around bag tags from local constituents saying that they don't like that system and the way it's working. " I think we're kind of flying blind until we get that." Councillor Sheila Currie, who was joining by phone said, "I am in support of making an increase in an amount to be determined with some information coming from Kirk." The motion passed with no amount specified, but the issue was, in the words of Potter "flagged" for future consideration. When McCaw returned to the meeting, he said that the only things they need to talk about in regards to the tipping fees were, "where we're actually going to set it and whether or not we're going to grandfather it in

gradually [?] We do have concrete figures on what it's actually costing us now, this year. We can't get back all of our money, but we can at least try to recoup some of our money. Mortimer also proposed that the municipality raise the cost of dog tags within the municipality in an attempt to help pay for the salary of the animal control officer. She suggested that Wollaston not only raise the price of the tags, but that they institute a program like Marmora and Lake, whereby the animal control officer visits each house and gets people to purchase tags right at their door. I was visited yesterday by the Marmora and Lake dog tag salesperson, said Mortimer, and they come to your house and when your dogs are barking they say, 'Do you have a tag for that dog,' and if you say 'no' they make you buy one right on the spot. According to Mortimer Marmora and Lakes, went from selling four per year to having revenue in the thousands of dollars for their dog tags. I think we should look at Marmora and Lakes at how to better make these costs balance. Fentie put forward a motion to explore additional revenue opportunities in animal control. The motion passed and will come back to council for discussion. After hearing about the remainder of the budget, council considered two requests for financial support from The Wollaston Lake Cottage Association for milfoil mitigation and a request from the Tri-Township Food Basket. The cottage association was requesting \$6,500 and the food basket did not specify an amount. In the end council decided to give the cottage association \$5,000 and the food basket \$1,000 and moved to reduce the maximum of the corporate management grant amount from \$8,000 to \$6,000 to match the requested amounts. This move reduced the proposed tax levy from 10.38 per cent to 10.26 per cent. Vader said that the public budget presentation will be held on April 9 and that a notice will be placed on the township website and Facebook page informing the public that the township was seeking input on the budget. She said that comments can be submitted by email at tvader@wollaston.ca or in person at 90 Wollaston Lake Rd, Coe Hill, ON until April 2. The public's comments will then be discussed at the April 9 meeting.