

County's 2018 budget shows investment in future

The theme for Lanark County's 2018 budget is "investing in our future," and efforts to do this are demonstrated in the plans that form part of the budget approved at the regular council meeting on Wednesday evening with a 1.4 per cent tax increase.

"This is my eleventh budget to bring to council and each year it is easier thanks to the directors, managers and finance staff who pull it together," said CAO Kurt Greaves. "Our management team does an excellent job of pulling the numbers together. I believe we have created a culture of respecting the taxpayer dollars, and you will see this."

He noted there are many competing interests affecting municipal budgets, such as the level of service expected by taxpayers and mandated by legislation and liability; the infrastructure deficit, capital plan and asset management; fiscal imbalance brought on by downloaded ambulance, social services, roads, and farm and forest rebates without adequate funding; and pressure to maintain low tax rates while dealing with regressive property taxation and inflation

Lanark County has identified the need to invest \$11.9 million annually in order to approach sustainable investment for asset replacement. The 2018 budget earmarks \$12.2 million for this, including a net capital levy of \$8.5 million, which has increased by \$3.1 million in the last five years. Loan payments (\$1.6 million), Federal Gas Tax (\$1.8 million) and the Ontario Infrastructure Fund (\$300,00) make up the rest.

"This council and previous councils have made a big commitment to capital renewal," Mr. Greaves said. "This will continue to improve our financial position and lead to a sustainable level of investment."

"The provincial debt is rising – now at \$321 billion – and this is the single biggest threat to the economic future of all Ontario residents," Mr. Greaves said, adding it is affecting the province's ability to fund beneficial projects.

The focus in 2018 is to invest in economic drivers, including the completion of the Ottawa Valley Recreation Trail (\$1.5 million), implementation of the Economic Development Strategic Plan (\$40k) and the possibility of investing in the Eastern Ontario Regional Network project to increase coverage and capacity (5G) to cell coverage to eastern Ontario (\$800,000).

The big ticket items of the OVRT and cell project are being financed from County reserves with those reserves being repaid over time. This "self-financing" allows us to avoid interest payments.

"We are also looking to increase the scope of work on controlling invasive species, housing redevelopment through Lanark County Housing Corporation and investments in Lanark Lodge's architecture," Mr. Greaves said.

The overall budget increase is 2.6 per cent, with the county collecting \$33.4 million from property taxpayers, up from \$32.5 million in 2017. Estimated gross expenditures are \$86.7 million with matching revenues of \$86.7 million. Municipal governments are not allowed to run deficits.

The public works budget represents 39 per cent of the county levy again this year, followed by emergency services/health at 21 per cent and social services and social housing at 18 per cent.

With assessment growth estimated to be 1.2 per cent, residential ratepayers with a property assessed at \$300,000 can expect to see an increase of \$16 on the county portion of their tax bill. The bill also includes the local municipal and the education portions. Tax rates and ratios for 2018 will be set by county council this spring.

Mr. Greaves noted there is no new debt in the 2018 budget, but decisions will be made on social housing redevelopment. "There has been no new debt since 2010." Existing debt includes non-profit housing from 2008, the county's contribution to Fairview Manor's redevelopment in 2006, the administration building rehabilitation in 2007/2008 and funds to increase road standards in 2005.

Corporate Services Chair Bill Dobson (Montague Reeve) expressed thanks for the hard work of staff taking council through the budget process. "There are many pressures to consider, but we have been able to keep the tax increase to only 1.4 per cent."

Warden John Fenik (Perth Mayor) thanked council, senior staff and departmental personnel for their efforts. "The theme of this year's budget was 'investing in our future,' and this is evident by the budget we have passed tonight."

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For more information, contact:
Kurt Greaves, CAO
Lanark County
1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 1101