

Pickering council passes budget

April 6, 2011

Kristen Calis

PICKERING -- Residents will see a property tax hike of 2.99 per cent this year. Nearly one month after 2011 budget talks began, Pickering council has approved the budget, meaning homeowners living in a semi-detached home assessed at \$350,970 will pay about \$31 more this year, or \$1,317.

Staff originally proposed 4.75 per cent on March 10, and then 3.56 per cent. When most councillors still found it too high, Mayor Dave Ryan challenged them to bring a list of budget items to cut to the next meeting.

Ward 2 City Councillor Doug Dickerson and Ward 1 Regional Councillor Jennifer O'Connell met the challenge, both offering a list of about \$250,000 of cuts on April 4, to bring the tax ratio down by about half a percent.

Coun. O'Connell's plan included reductions in the areas of mayor and council salary increases, staff salaries, computer hardware replacements, and the office of sustainability. She said her goal wasn't to come up with a magical number for the tax ratio, but to find ways to make the budget responsible.

Coun. Dickerson's plan included decreasing expenditures in the library and the office of sustainability, and deferring some capital projects, such as a new fire hall sign and new council chamber chairs, to 2012.

His plan also stipulated that if there is a savings on the capital projects in the budget, staff put the deferred items back in on a priority basis.

CAO Tony Prevedel explained Coun. Dickerson's list met the financial target without cutting programs and suggested council go with his plan.

Ward 2 Regional Councillor Bill McLean supported both plans, and felt the two could be combined to reduce the tax increase to 2.5 per cent. Council ended up taking Mr. Prevedel's advice and supported Coun. Dickerson's work.

Ward 3 City Councillor David Pickles pointed out staff and council will scrutinize numbers as projects go forward.

"The scrutiny and the wise spending doesn't end here," he said.

Despite Coun. O'Connell, Coun. McLean and Ward 3 Regional Councillor Peter Rodrigues voting in opposition, both the \$45.6-million current and \$25-million capital budgets were passed with four votes.