

South Bruce Peninsula talks budget

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The Town of South Bruce Peninsula has started its budget deliberations with a proposed tax rate increase of 4.66%.

Council held its first of three scheduled budget meeting in Wiarton on Wednesday, hoping to whittle down the increase, which for a house assessed at \$150,000, would mean a \$38 annual tax bill increase.

"It's our job to pare it down and to provide the service we can afford and what we think people are asking for," said South Bruce Peninsula Mayor John Close.

Council heard on Wednesday to get to a 0% tax rate increase, they would have to eliminate more than \$400,000 from the more than \$9 million proposed 2013 tax levy.

Close said while he is all for a 0% increase, getting there may be unrealistic.

"Just the small things that the province downloads on municipalities, this creeps up on us," said Close . "For every department you add more and more of this paperwork that the upper levels of government are asking of us and it creeps up on us."

Close said it is hard to communicate to the people how demanding and costly downloaded responsibilities such as the paperwork the province, insurance companies and police require, can be.

"You talk to staff and there is more and more to do and you wonder why," said Close.

The original proposed operating and capital budget put together by staff had a tax rate increase of more than 9%, but prior to Wednesday's meeting department heads met and removed a number of items to bring the increase down, including \$70,000 for a mobile washroom, \$20,000 for playground equipment and close to \$100,000 to pave the parking lot at Bluewater Park.

On Wednesday, council was analyzing the various departments and reviewing the budget costs for 2013. While there wasn't a lot of cutting being done, Close expected some hard decisions would have to be made. Some items were being "parked" until council decided if they could be paid for without hitting the taxpayers with too much of an increase.

"We have just been dealing with council and administration and there's not a whole lot in there that can be cut," said Close. "Once we get into roads that is where you will see the capital coming in."

Staff also recommended transferring money from reserves, including \$95,000 for council legal costs and \$77,000 for administrative legal costs.

For 2013, staff have budgeted significantly more for legal costs in 2013 than in 2012. In 2013, \$135,000 has been budgeted for legal costs. In 2012, nothing was budgeted for legal costs, but just under \$48,000 has been spent. In the general administration budget, for 2013, \$220,000 has been budgeted for legal costs, while in 2012, \$100,000 was budgeted and more than \$136,000 has been spent.

Close said the town is being proactive in budgeting for legal costs, even though it may not all be used.

"We have the (Sauble Beach) native land claim that is going to be moving forward to arbitration. We have many issues dealing with the airport and things like that you can't just not budget for. You have to put something in there in anticipation," said Close.

"It's a matter before the court dealing with the Sauble Beach issue. We are not sure where that is going to take us at this time."

The next scheduled budget meeting for the town is Monday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. The third scheduled meeting on Feb. 8 is when staff plans to have the tax rate bylaw presented to council. At the Feb. 8 meeting there is a public comment session scheduled for between 9 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. The current schedule would then see the bylaw brought forward on council's agenda for passing on Feb. 19.