

Council adds to free parking

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By Rob Gowan

South Bruce Peninsula will offer free parking at its boat launches next year as well as at Sauble Beach.

Council decided Tuesday at a special budget meeting in Wiarton to stop charging for parking at the municipal boat launches in Wiarton and Sauble Beach after deciding it wasn't worth the cost to operate the system.

"After staff was able to give us some numbers, we saw that maintaining ticket spitters at the boat launches was a moneylosing proposition," said Coun. Jim Turner. "We can now look at doing away with the ticket spitters in all locations for parking and for the boat launches and still have a very, very minimal impact on the levy."

Council also decided to keep \$150,000 generated from paid parking out of its reserves and use the money for the 2014 budget, cutting into the more than 2% tax increase that eliminating paid parking represented.

"I find it very difficult saying we are going to do away with the revenue stream, but we are still going to put money aside that was going to come from it," said Turner. "Now we are not going to put that money in, according to the resolution today and if the budget passes. We have reduced that requirement while maintaining a very high level of reserves that meets all expectations and needs."

In a 4-3 vote at a budget meeting on Dec. 3, council decided to eliminate paid parking at Sauble Beach. Council debated the matter further on Tuesday, but stood by its decision.

The two councillors who were absent from the previous week's meeting were split on the matter, with Coun. Jay Kirkland speaking in favour of eliminating paid parking and Coun. Chris Thomas for keeping it.

During the meeting, councillors reported mixed reactions from ratepayers, with some saying the majority have been in favour of the decision and others saying most people want to keep paid parking.

"Yes we did have a huge influx of e-mails and there was social media commentary on both sides," said Turner. "I go by the people at the local coffee shop . . . and those are the people who told me 'You mean we can go back to Sauble this year and park for free?' I said it looks like it and they said 'Thank you'."

Coun. Janice Jackson said the vast majority of residents who wrote town hall were against the decision.

"The councillors that sat at the table today and said they had received opposite opinions, they were all verbal, nothing to show as far as letters, nothing in writing, just hearsay," said Jackson.

Jackson said she believes council is making a big mistake in getting rid of an important revenue source. She says it costs \$300,000 annually to maintain the beach and the cost should be borne by the users.

"The bottom line is we have \$300,000 in maintenance to do at the beach and we gave away \$177,000 in revenue," said Jackson, who plans to vote against the budget. "It has got to be made up somewhere and they are planning to dip into reserves to pay that. How much can you dip into reserves to pay for decisions like that?"

Council started budget deliberations with no increase, but changes have been made during discussions. One Tuesday was to commit \$60,000 per year for the next five years to Grey Bruce Health Services for upgrades to its cancer and heart treatment equipment and facilities.

Michael Humble, the town's manager of financial services, said via e-mail late Tuesday afternoon that the budget increase now stands at 2.6%.

Council will have final say on the budget and plans to vote on it at a meeting Dec. 17 beginning at 9 a.m.