



## Town passes 3.79 per cent tax increase

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After months of calculations, delegations, revisions and last minute add-ons Oakville's Town Council is calling it a budget.

The \$181.4 million operating budget and \$82.5 million capital budget, which represent an 11.9 per cent spending increase over last year, passed with unanimous support from council during Tuesday night's meeting.

For Oakville residents these numbers add up to a property tax increase of 3.79 per cent with homeowners paying an additional \$38 per \$100,000 of assessment.

The increase to the tax bill arrived at its final total after council agreed to allocate \$20,000 to the Oakville Arts Council's (OAC) Cultural Grant Program.

Oakville Arts Council President Ken Kawall outlined the importance of council continuing to fund the grants.

"The Town's Cultural Grant Program was established in 1989 and it was really done to enable community based non-profit cultural organizations to develop and flourish. It provides both operating and project funding to those organizations," said Kawall.

"The benefits of the cultural grants, we feel, are very significant. First of all it acknowledges the volunteer efforts of the various groups and the current applicants account for some 820 volunteers involving a contribution of some 60,000 volunteer hours. They also help support some of the administrative efforts in the sector and a number of the groups will use these funds to increase their memberships and participation."

Other budget highlights included the hiring of an additional 22 firefighters, improved transit service, more money to promote tourism, enhanced library programs, a new youth centre and increased support for heritage planning.

Not everyone was happy about the budget, however, with Oakville resident John Kay calling on councillors to reject the budget in favour of a plan that would deal with the Town's \$35-million debt.

"After spending an hour with someone in the Town of Richmond Hill's finance department, I am convinced that debt free is the right direction for the Town's budget to be heading towards," he said.

"Richmond Hill is similar in size and population to our town. Richmond Hill was debt free when it sold Richmond Hill Hydro in 2004 for \$134 million. I would suggest this would be a way for us to pay off our debts as a short term solution."

Other cost-saving measures Kay suggested the Town should adopt included: reducing the number of full-time Town staff, issuing municipal bonds at 6 per cent, selling vacant town lands and reducing Town staff salaries.

"I think the issues I am raising have been missed by quite a few budget committees in the past, but it is never too late to change," said Kay.

Oakville Mayor Rob Burton, however, noted that Kay's suggestions would not work as Oakville is Oakville and not Richmond Hill.

"For one thing, we divide Town and Region responsibilities differently. There are also geographic differences as Oakville is bigger in land area. Richmond Hill has 100 square kilometers, we have 139 square kilometers, so we're 39 per cent bigger," said Burton.

"They have almost 40 per cent more single-person households than we have. We have almost 30 per cent more households with kids than they do and this effects what we do for our residents. We have more libraries. We have more pools. We have more community centres. We have more sports fields. We have more trails and we have more parks."

In closing, Burton noted that Oakville's debt is well within provincial limits and pointed out that Richmond Hill's tax bills are higher than Oakville's with this year's property tax increase slightly above Oakville's at 4.09 per cent.

"The bottom line is that we are Oakville and not anywhere else," he said.

## Oakville Beaver

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