

County continues sustainable investment efforts with 2016 budget

“Catching momentum” is the theme for Lanark County’s 2016 budget as it builds upon efforts to approach sustainable investment. The budget was approved at the regular council meeting Wednesday evening with an estimated 1.6 per cent tax increase.

“Our number one challenge continues to be achieving fiscal sustainability in the midst of several competing interests,” said CAO/Treasurer Kurt Greaves. “Among these are taxpayer expectations regarding levels of service, the ongoing infrastructure deficit issue that is affecting the entire country, the fiscal imbalance created by services downloaded by the province and the challenge of maintaining low tax rates.”

The county continues its efforts to monitor asset replacement costs against weighted average useful life and determined \$11 million needs to be invested annually. With the 2016 budget, the total capital investment will be \$10.9 million, made up by the net capital levy (\$7.1 million), loan payments (\$2 million), federal gas tax funds (\$1.7 million) and Ontario Infrastructure Funds (\$100,000). The levy has seen an increase of \$1.3 million over the last three years for capital investment.

The overall budget increase is 3 per cent, with the county collecting \$31.6 million from property taxpayers, up from \$30.7 million in 2015. Estimated gross expenditures are \$78.3 million, which is a decrease from \$78.4 million in 2015, but gross revenues (before property tax) are down from \$47.8 million to \$46.7 million. Again this year, the change in revenue is attributed to a reduction in the amount being transferred from reserves.

Capital costs represent some of the major changes to the budget this year with a 3 per cent increase, operating costs also increase 3 per cent. This includes an increase to emergency services/health with the addition of an ambulance to the 5 p.m. to 1 a.m. shift and an emergency response vehicle working weekends, for a total of \$335,000. Capital projects in 2016 include \$500,000 towards construction of the McNeely Avenue extension in Carleton Place and the Smiths Falls Area Ambulance Base.

Additional expenditures include the planning and feasibility study of a potential social housing redevelopment as part of the Housing and Homelessness Plan; the possible purchase of the CP Rail Corridor, for which a reserve has been established; and possible contract awards for a county and local municipal solar partnership.

The public works budget represents 39 per cent of the county levy again this year, followed by emergency services/health at 23 per cent and social services and social housing at 19 per cent.

Final 2016 assessment data is not available, but with growth estimated to be about 1.4 per cent, residential ratepayers with a property assessed at \$300,000 can expect to see an increase of \$18 on the county portion of their tax bill. The bill also includes the local municipal and the education portions. Tax rates and ratios for 2016 will be set by county council this spring.

“Financial sustainability remains the number one goal of county council and staff,” Mr. Greaves said. “By focusing on our core services and capital renewal we are able to continue to improve our financial position. Our asset replacement funding is catching momentum as we work towards a sustainable level of investment.”

Warden Keith Kerr (Tay Valley Reeve) thanked council, senior staff and departmental personnel for their hard work during the budget process. “The county is in a good financial position, and if we continue on the current path we will build a strong future.”

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