2021-2022 Budget Address

Region of Queens Municipality
April 27, 2021

Mayor Darlene Norman

I want to begin this first budget speech of the new Council by saying thank you to those in our community.

We are parents and guardians, siblings, partners, cousins and loved ones who support one another, have missed the physical closeness of each other, have quietly celebrated happiness and mourned sadness and loss, in a fashion different to what we are accustomed to.

We are retailers, business owners, labourers, industry service employees, manufacturers and truckers who leave our homes to provide essential services, food and health materials when others are told “Stay home. Stay safe.”

We are teachers, school administrators, support staff and early childhood educators who continue to provide educational services.

We are the students in our school and universities who will not experience the joys of extracurricular activities such as sport teams and clubs, the excitement of a Christmas Concert, the thrill of a prom or the pride of walking across a graduation stage in an auditorium filled with peers, friends and family.

We are the volunteers who display amazing dedication, commitment and compassion as we help one another.

We are the municipal, indigenous, provincial and federal staff who operate as normally as possible to carry out the expectations of our public.

We are the staff of Hillsview Acres, North Queens Nursing Home, Queens Manor, supportive living and private care facilities who have worked so hard to keep our residents safe and happy.

We are the emergency service, healthcare workers and volunteers who work endlessly to provide care and protection in times of crises.

We are all of the above and many more. We look our friends and neighbours in the eye and we work together to protect one another. This is what community is. This is what community does.

Therefore, Wela'lin, Thank you 'Community'. Thank you for wearing your mask, keeping your distance and doing your part. Be kind, be patient and we will find our way through.

Background to 2021-2022 Budget

Today, Council presents its first budget of its four year mandate, and the process to get to this point has been challenging and difficult. As a group on the job for less than six months, we were faced with millions of dollars of requests both internally and from external community groups and governments, with little discretionary money to meet these needs.

Our infrastructure continues to age, and our population continues to grow older with more people on fixed incomes, and our community wants continue to rise. While the provincial and federal governments can incur massive deficits and debts, municipal government cannot do that according to law.

If we want to grow and develop we first must acknowledge where we want to grow, how we want to invest in our community, as well as where we are weak and need to improve.

While we have many positive attributes, Queens County also has serious challenges we need to address. A high poverty rate, an aging population with recent statistics indicating 60% of our residents are over fifty years old and 37.4% of residents in Queens identifying as having a disability are real facts.

These numbers are a serious cause for concern. We must do what is necessary and address these issues.

The Municipality must take action and create a community with sound infrastructure that attracts residents as well as industrial and commercial growth. In conjunction with our provincial and federal counterparts and the help of those who believe in Queens, we will improve our community.

Today's budget will see us through the next 12 months, but it comes with tax rate increases in order to address our current financial challenges. This year will also see less money put into reserves for future projects.

Reserves are an important foundation for municipalities and the less we put in, the less sustainable we are.

For this reason, as we move forward, when Council wishes to increase its operational and capital spending, it must be from tax rate increases or a severe reduction in spending in other areas.

2021-2022 Operating, Capital and Water Budgets

Council will shortly present its 2021-2022, operating, capital and water utility budgets according to provincial legislation and regulations.

The operating budget will see revenues increase by $861,379. Nearly half of this increase in revenues is the direct result in a 4-cent tax increase for all tax accounts throughout Queens.

Additionally, Council has chosen to increase the deed transfer tax from 1% to 1.5% to generate a projected additional $150,000 in this budget year. This tax only applies when properties are sold for value between private interests and does not apply to family transactions at no value. These two increases, along with increased assessments and new construction, account for most of this increased revenue.

This increased revenue is being used to pay for increased operating costs to provide services and infrastructure, as well as providing additional funding to community groups.

Our five fire departments will be the biggest recipient of this increased tax revenue as they will be provided with two cents of the 4-cent increase in taxes totalling approximately $193,000.

This will increase the Municipality's total contribution to fire services overall to $1,301,696. If we remove the hydrant fee, this figure is $1,104,461.

Our tax payers pay 100% of fire and fire fighter expenditures for wet hydrants in Liverpool and area, workers compensation and medical insurance coverage for all fire fighters, liability insurance, interest on loans from the Municipality, dispatch services, maintenance and plowing of dry hydrants through the county and all operating costs of the Liverpool Fire Hall.

The Municipality also provides non-repayable grants for monies towards truck purchases, training, bunker gear and breathing apparatus for all fire departments. Fire services is an important aspect of our community and the increase in monies to the departments illustrates this point.

Accessibility has become an important issue for Nova Scotians and the provincial government has legislated that by 2030 public spaces in Nova Scotia must be accessible. Knowing that comes with a very big price tag, we are starting to move forward this year to meet our obligation. $100,000 has been budgeted to make changes in order that Town Hall Arts and Cultural Centre will be more accessible for our residents and visitors.

Additionally, if Autism Nova Scotia is able to raise the remaining funds this summer to complete the proposed inclusive playground on the lands of the Municipality, that project could potentially begin this winter.

Council will be contributing $30,000 to Queens Daycare Association to help pay for its increased operating costs.

Our policing costs are also increasing $91,000, our provincial education, corrections and roads costs are increasing $46,000, and our new solid waste collection contract beginning on April 1, 2021, is increasing $216,043; a 21% increase in one year.

To limit the overall tax increase to four cents, many of our internal department budgets have seen cuts. Our staff are being asked to do more with less. As a result, please be patient with staff over the coming year, as meeting demands in a timely fashion is going to be very challenging and sometimes not possible.

Our capital budget is proposed to total $22,459,135 in 2021-2022 and will see the replacement of current infrastructure that have outlived their useful lives.

After a 13-year pause without fuel at South Shore Regional Airport, a new above ground fuel system will be installed later this year at a total cost of approximately $50,000.

Water and sewer infrastructure on Court Street and the remainder of Union Street in Liverpool will be replaced this summer and fall at a cost of $1,125,000.

Additionally, this upcoming year will see the beginning of work on the replacement of Milton Centennial Pool with construction of a new outdoor South Queens Aquatic Centre, estimated at $2.5 million.

Hillsview Acres, now more than 128 years old, is proposed to be replaced and will require the Municipality to borrow $13.6 million if the project is approved by the Province of Nova Scotia.

Like most of our municipal operations this year, our water utility has been under great strain as well. We anticipate ending last fiscal year with a deficit and are budgeting a larger deficit in 2021-2022.

The last rate hearing for water rate increases for Liverpool was in 2002. That rate increase was approved and came into effect up until 2005 when the water treatment plant became functional.

It is now 17 years later, and we are incurring deficits and our depreciation reserve for future repairs and upgrades is diminishing to the point where a rate increase will be needed.

While the water budget includes no new increases in rates in this upcoming fiscal year, an external consultant will be examining our situation and new proposed rates will come forward to begin on April 1, 2022. As an example of this necessity, two recent unexpected maintenance problems which occurred in the past several weeks, has resulted in the proposed budget for the water utility in 2021-2022 to show an anticipated deficit of $40,253.

2020 was a very challenging year for everyone mentally, and unfortunately 2021 and beyond are going to be extremely challenging years financially for our Municipality and community.

Wants and demands are high and our current ability to collect revenue is not keeping pace. Our path to recovery includes creating a welcoming community.

Investing in accessibility, inclusion and infrastructure are attractive pillars for those seeking to relocate their home and/or business. Recent realignment of our Economic Development Department will strengthen our business and immigration strategies, encouraging population growth and a diverse, robust business community.

Council will need to make some tough choices going forward. I know our Council is committed to reviewing all aspects of our operations and making the decisions that will lead us to sustainable operations. To do so, we need your ideas, thoughts and your support of our sometimes unpopular decisions.

Please, reach out directly to your elected members of the Region of Queens whether it be a question, concern or idea. We have the best interests of the community at heart, now and in the future.

Thank You