

A budget increase in a pandemic year..really?

Chris Cooke - January 2021

Petrolia gets it.

Sarnia apparently doesn't.

And the contrast is stark when Rick Charlebois the Treasurer and Chief Administrative Officer of Petrolia is compared to Holly Reynolds, Sarnia's acting Treasurer.

Charlebois seems to understand that there is a pandemic creating economic hardship on his community and for that matter all of Ontario.

Reynolds, not so much.

In presenting a zero - budget increase to Town Council last month Charlebois went out of his way to explain the economic realities of a pandemic that has killed thousands of people and destroyed large portions of the business community.

Not just in Petrolia but elsewhere.

He is something of a zealot.

If nothing else his description of the past year is a reality check.

The word "unprecedented" rolls off his tongue like an exclamation mark as he suggests the chaos of last year could be a warm up for this year at least until a vaccine is widely distributed.

With laser focus on the Town's finances he believes, "this isn't the time for an increase in the municipal budget," adding, "there has been enough pain and suffering without adding more."

Last March he and his administration furloughed more than 100 full, part-time and contract employees at the arena, community center and Victoria Playhouse where all productions were cancelled.

Which brought him and Petrolia to its \$17.5 million budget with a zero increase. There wasn't any cutting or hacking needed because he, his administration and Town Council knew it was the right thing to do.

If nothing else it was about the optics.

A feel-good budget at the worst possible time.

Mayor Brad Loosley described it this way. The zero-budget started with the treasurer and his administration and trickled down to Council. "Immediately everyone was on the same page."

Which brings me back to Sarnia where the timing is awful and the optics are worse.

Like Charlebois, Sarnia's Chief Administrative Officer Chris Carter did the right thing when the pandemic began. He chopped \$2 million from his \$154.5 million budget. He let the grass grow in municipal parks and he eliminated 160 full, part-time and summer jobs.

But as summer wore on and COVID cases in Sarnia subsided it appears Carter lost his focus.

He let his acting treasurer roll out a \$156 million draft budget with a 2.9 per cent increase in the midst of a pandemic as winter settled in and case counts escalated.

His acting treasurer, one Holly Reynolds is probably a very nice person who works in a cozy office at City Hall with a guaranteed pay cheque and who is removed from the realities at street level.

Like the treasurer in Petrolia she could have done the right thing.

But she didn't.

While she initially suggested it was a "good news" budget I fail to see the good in a \$155.8 million budget with a two per cent tax increase that jacks up taxes, reserves and service fees all around.

While capital spending is at record levels and reserves, rainy day funds if you will top \$27 million there are questions to be asked of Ms. Reynolds.

Is it really necessary to teardown Germain Park arena at a cost of \$350,000.00?

Could it not wait until vaccines are rolled out, the pandemic subsides and the economy sputters back to life?

Surely, she is aware that some \$73 million is allocated to staff salaries and benefits and her allocations in every City department are based on pre - pandemic figures.

Let me clarify that.

No one loses his or her job and everyone gets a raise.

Yet according to Ms. Reynolds there isn't a single dollar that can be reallocated to bring a pandemic year increase back to zero.

Mayor Mike Bradley's solution is to tinker with the budget in say February or March once Lambton County sets its budget and we see how far the local economy tumbles in the dead of winter.

Meanwhile, layoffs are happening in the Chemical Valley, retailers and restaurant owners are suffering and it is cold both inside and out.

Or as Councillor Bill Dennis puts it reserves are for rainy days and it is pouring outside.

If Ms. Reynolds was to leave the comfy confines of her cozy City Hall office she would appreciate that her timing is awful and the optics are worse.

It is time for the acting treasurer to stop acting like a treasurer and be one.

I could be wrong about this but I'm not.

