

City Hall staffers propose a budget hike in a pandemic year

Chris Cooke - November 2020

If you listen to acting City Treasurer Holly Reynolds her proposed \$156.2 million municipal budget is a “good news story given the challenging year 2020 has provided”.

If like Holly you are gainfully employed and likely getting a pay raise the proposed 2.37% increase in the general levy isn't any sweat.

But unlike Holly and her 449 other colleagues at City Hall a large swath of municipal taxpayers are sweating it.

They work, or more likely used to work in the private sector which has been bashed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Travel, tourism and restaurant jobs can only be described as tenuous at best.

Federal and Provincial politicians are preparing us for what has been described as a “dark winter”.

It was Chamber of Commerce President Allen Calvert who noted upon his arrival back in Sarnia last summer that while the pandemic has decimated the private sector, “no one seems to be sweating it in the public sector”.

Which brings me back to Holly and her “good news story”.

I don't mean to pick on her but her view of good news from the warmth and comfort of her downtown office is at best open to debate.

Holly describes 2020 as a challenging year.

For whom?

Holly or the hundreds of Sarnians who are relegated to unemployment and are delinquent on their municipal taxes. We know tax delinquencies are up, but City officials can't tell us by how much because apparently no one has been keeping track.

For months, there haven't been any penalties as Sarnians delay, postpone or avoid paying property taxes.

Yet here we are with a good news pandemic budget with 2.37% increase that for some strange reason doesn't seem to pass the smell test.

Staffing and wages represent 56% of it.

Thanks to the magic of Chief Administrative Officer Chris Carter who left 20 bureaucratic positions open, didn't hire 160 part – timers and summer students, and rearranged the deck chairs on what surely would have been the Titanic, the City is ending 2020 with a \$400,000.00 surplus.

He chopped, with Council's blessing, nearly \$2 million from this year's budget. But that was this year, which begs the question what are you doing next?

Out here at street level storm clouds appear to be rolling in. The pandemic isn't getting any better, cooped up taxpayers appear to be hunkering down and local restaurateurs and retailers are paying the price as the Amazons of the world with on line shopping are skipping all the way to the bank.

So, what's with the tax increase?

If Holly were to look out the window of her City Hall office she would see that main street is suffering. And if she were to have a conversation with Councilor Bill Dennis he would tell her this isn't the year.

In fact, his demeanor changes when discussing City finances.

Dennis is vocal in his description saying City Hall staff like to believe they are cognizant of what is going on but abruptly suggests they aren't. If pressed, words like “out of touch” pop out adding, “people are being squeezed” and some businesses are hurting.

Dennis suggests the surplus and \$1.1 million earmarked for rainy day reserves be used to drive down the increase to create a truly “good news story”.

His question is, if this isn't a rainy day what is?

If Holly thinks 2020 has been challenging she should consider this.

At my business, Huron Web Printing and Graphics in Wyoming we still have

40 employees on furlough. We have fewer people working harder.

We are driving farther and scratching in corners for business.

Challenging?

Let me suggest Holly and the administration at Sarnia City Hall fail to appreciate the meaning of the word.

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

