

## COVER STORY

# The timing is awful and the optics are worse for City budget says Dennis

by Chris Cooke



The optics are all wrong.

And with those words Sarnia Councillor Bill Dennis says he intends to challenge an administration decision to pass along a two per cent budget increase.

With the Province in a pandemic lockdown Dennis says “the timing is awful and the optics are worse”.

While the nearby Town of Petrolia is singing the praises of Rick Charlebois its Chief Administrative Officer and Treasurer who wheeled out a \$17.5 million budget with a zero increase Sarnia landed on a two per cent increase that adds \$1.2 million in spending to its \$155.8 million budget.

“This shouldn’t be happening and it certainly shouldn’t be happening now” says Dennis who advocated for the use of \$2.4 million in reserves to bring Sarnia’s increase to zero.

“Our citizens aren’t stupid, they know what is going on” says Dennis who suggests the administration at City Hall “is out of touch with taxpayers”.

Dennis isn’t buying a suggestion from Sarnia’s acting treasurer Holly Reynolds who says using the reserves to create a zero-budget increase in the City would “involve significant service cuts”.

Charlebois described 2020 as an “unprecedented” year and 2021 is starting out as bad if not worse. “When we looked at Petrolia’s finances we knew this wasn’t the time for an increase” he says adding “there had been enough pain and suffering without adding more”.

When the pandemic struck last March Charlebois says his administration reacted quickly closing the arena and community center and cancelling productions at Victoria Playhouse. More than 100 full, part-time and contract employees were furloughed while he and his staff considered all options.

People were laid off, people were redeployed and capital projects were delayed says Charlebois who admits to trying to steer the Town’s finances with a “steady hand through chaos”.

“We did a lot of short and long-term planning” he says “to get a grip on where we were heading”.

And Charlebois tapped into as much Federal and Provincial COVID relief money as he possibly could to transition Petrolia to a year-end surplus.

Petrolia received \$150,000.00 in phase one funding and another \$500,000.00 late last year leaving the Town with a \$200,000.00 surplus. Charlebois says most of the senior government money was used to offset revenue losses at the community center and Victoria Playhouse.

Mayor Brad Loosley told First Monday the “real beauty” of the budget is the optics created by a zero increase in the midst of the pandemic and the surplus.

The administration worked well with Council says Loosley noting “everyone knew this wasn’t the year for a rate increase. Everyone was on the same page”. And even with a zero budget Loosley says the Town is “getting things done”.

Reconstruction of Greenfield Street, a new \$250,000.00 dump truck and money for downtown promotion are included in the \$17.5 million budget which includes a zero-tax rate, a zero increase in sewer, water and service fees.

Loosley says the zero-increase started with the treasurer and his administration who found budget cuts while “still getting projects done”.

Dennis says the situation in Petrolia is just the opposite to Sarnia where acting treasurer Holly Reynolds rolled out a municipal budget with increased capital spending but also increased reserves, increased fees and increased taxes.

“Now we are in lockdown, we need to use our reserves and rainy-day funds because it is pouring outside” says Dennis adding that “in normal times a two per cent increase in the City would be acceptable but these aren’t normal times”.

Sarnia Mayor Mike Bradley views the City budget as a starting point saying “it isn’t set in stone”. When the two per cent increase was unanimously accepted in December he says he fully expected the City would have to revisit it by February or March and now with the Province – wide lockdown suggests it may be sooner.

Bradley says he is proud of the administration for rolling out a budget with more than \$61 million in capital expenditures without any new debt. He says the “financial sands are shifting daily” but reminds Dennis and his Council colleagues the City is “in for the long game” as the pandemic rages on.

Bradley fully expects the \$2 million in budget cuts that surfaced last Spring will reappear “sooner rather than later”.

Dennis says the buck stops with the politicians and he believes Sarnia Council could have done a better job.

