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Pre-draft budget meeting identifies roads, transportation as priorities



Pre-draft budget meeting

Jessica Cunha/Metroland

West Carleton resident Adele Muldoon speaks with city staffer Chad Findlay during a pre-draft budget meeting on Sept. 29. Muldoon says more money is needed for rural seniors' services, especially affordable transportation.

West Carleton Review

By [Jessica Cunha](#)

The city could save money if it focused on debt reduction through attrition and finding a better balance between full-time and contract workers, says the former mayor of West Carleton township.

Dwight Eastman raised the two points at a ward 5 pre-draft budget meeting on Sept. 29. The meeting was held in an effort to learn where residents felt the city could save and their top priorities for 2016.

Eastman, the first West Carleton councillor after the city amalgamated, said the city could save funds by not rehiring when people retire or resign.

“Most money in most cases goes to salaries,” said Eastman, adding the city could reduce its workforce as people retire or resign, and hold exit interviews when people leave the city’s employ to see if they have ideas worth exploring.

He also said the city should also look at where it could save money by contracting more work.

His suggestions were well received by West Carleton-March Coun. Eli El-Chantiry. He said people are staying longer in their jobs, so the city doesn't see much in the way of reducing numbers through attrition, but some departments may benefit by more contract employees.

"I thought his idea is worth exploring," said the councillor. "Five per cent of all departments are contracted out. Not all contracts are cheaper, but it's a good idea to review, study."

About 20 residents attended the pre-draft budget meeting, held at the West Carleton Community Complex. The meeting also featured city staff from nine departments who were on hand to provide information.

Resident Adele Muldoon said more money is needed for seniors' services, especially transportation in the rural west end.

Community resource centres in the city's south and east ends have seen an uptick in older adults accessing their driver services, but the same doesn't hold true for the west end. Muldoon attributed this to the longer distances West Carleton residents face, making the service too expensive to access.

"We have to make it so they can live here," said Muldoon. "Make that transportation more affordable."

She suggested getting rid of the free shoppers' bus service that runs on Wednesdays from Dunrobin and Carp. She said the number of people using it on a regular basis is low. Eliminating the West Carleton shoppers' bus would save the city \$20,000, while eliminating all five rural runs would save the city \$100,000.

El-Chantiry said he didn't think that was a feasible solution since people do rely on the bus to take them into town every week.

"Folks are using this bus service," he said, adding there's an average of 25-28 people using the bus. "A lot of people have cars here but a lot of people don't. If the only recommendation is taking the bus away from seniors, that's disheartening."

Roads, always a priority in West Carleton as the largest ward with the most roadways, were also identified as important.

"Currently, half our roads are below the accepted standard," said resident Ken Holmes, adding road maintenance is underfunded by \$40-million per year. "What can the budget do to start to improve that?"

El-Chantiry said that's why the city is hosting consultations around Ottawa, to get ideas from residents where to save money.

“That’s what we’re looking for, ideas,” said the councillor. “Last year’s budget there was not enough for roads, but one-third of the money went to West Carleton. Was it enough? Probably not. Now we need more.”

DEFICIT

Resident Janne Campbell said more needs to be done to avoid another \$41-million deficit like the city is facing this year.

Every department should have to complete a comprehensive review at least once every four years, while financial reviews should take place every quarter, she said.

“I think that would help keep the train on the track,” said Campbell. “Program reviews would offer efficiencies.”

Tom Fedec, manager with the city’s budget and financial planning, said quarterly reports are mandatory, but the city faced a number of additional expenses it wasn’t counting on this year – such as additional winter maintenance, union-negotiated awards to city employees, and the province’s decision to pay firefighters who suffered certain forms of cancer under the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act.

“We are looking at efficiencies,” said Fedec. “We’re all taxpayers, we don’t want to pay more than we have to.”

Residents are encouraged to submit their ideas and comments on the budget conversation by emailing the councillor at eli.el-chantiry@ottawa.ca and the city’s budget email address at budget2016@ottawa.ca.

The draft budget will be tabled at council on Nov. 12, before going to committee discussions, and put to vote Dec. 9.

SIDEBAR

A budget breakdown

The city’s deputy treasurer gave attendees of a pre-draft budget meeting a “Budget 101” on Sept. 29.

Wendy Stephanson broke down the city’s 2015 budget of \$3.1 million to show people which areas have wiggle room when it comes to funding.

“It gives you an idea of what’s discretionary and what’s not discretionary,” said Stephanson.

There are six major categories for programs delivered by the city with varying amounts of budgetary discretion. The 2015 budget was broken down:

- \$390 million to user funded services, which include parking, garbage collection and water and sewer.

Revenues from user fees are used to maintain the services, said Stephanson.

- \$724 million to non-discretionary services, which include long-term care, public health, social services and debt charges. These items are legislated provincially.

“These are mandatory. We don’t have a choice, we have to pay these fees,” said Stephanson.

- \$316 million to limited discretion services, which include police and bylaw.

Council can only approve or refuse to approve the police budget, but the two entities work closely to develop the budget, said Stephanson.

- \$1.1 billion to programs with service standards, which include transit, fire and paramedic, roads and traffic.

“These are programs that have to meet a certain standard,” said Stephanson.

- \$315 million to direct service programs, such as library, parks and recreation, and recycling.

“There’s some room here to make changes, but any changes will affect services,” said Stephanson.

- \$219 million to support services, such as finance, human resources and communication.

The most flexible part of the budget is also the smallest portion, making up seven per cent of the total budget, said Stephanson.