

The new strong mayor powers' budget

Margaret Bird - February 2024

To most, budgeting means the process by which we allocate finite resources to our prioritized needs. However, within government entities, this word seems to represent the legal authority to spend money like there's no tomorrow!

By comparing incoming/outgoing funds, you know what you can afford to spend, or where to cut back. If our local municipality used the same considerations, we wouldn't be in our current financial situation.

The biggest problem with Sarnia's annual budget, especially over the last five years, is the lack of communication and transparency. Senior staff have been asked, repeatedly, via several carried motions, for the exact amount of old money being carried forward each year, and the new money being injected into our community for the coming year... but that's always hidden behind pages of green, yellow and red boxes, explaining capital projects as on budget, behind budget, or over budget. Such deviated avoidance of two specific figures that wouldn't even take up one line at the beginning of the budget document? In fact, by convoluting the complexity by which they report the finances, this takes more time and staff, leading to yet more hiring.

Yes, hiring, contracts and consultants – the largest section on the city's annual budget pie chart. And they are not stopping yet, as the hiring slice on the 2024 pie chart has increased by seven to eight per cent. We so often hear that... "If you want the best people, you have to pay for them." Well, we are certainly paying for them but the city administration is still using an exorbitant amount of out-of-city consultants every single year. We cannot afford employees and consultants. In my humble opinion, there should be an immediate freeze placed on consultants. Which brings us to salaries -- some of the highest ever seen for a public-service organization whose purpose is to render services with the money we pay them through our taxes. Municipalities do not generate their own product revenue – far from it – they have set streams of money coming into their coffers, which all need to be budgeted extremely carefully, with essentials being paid for long before any wish-list items can be considered.

The yearly publicized 'Sunshine List' needs another name. At one time, it was a prestigious listing, for a very fortunate few, who received over \$100,000 per year. Now, dare I say, there's probably nobody earning under \$100,000 – on the bureaucratic list that is. And, to make this all seem okay, somebody in the financial corner of city hall worked out that an average household personal income, amongst our city's residents, is approximately \$103,000 – which is outrageous – not only in amount but, also, because this figure was used to calculate our property tax increase for 2024 (3.4% of that figure being for the property taxes and 4.4% of that figure being for water and sewer rate increases).

Now let's take a look at the capital projects that are still waiting for the green light. Our mayor says that he is the mayor of everyone – no discrimination – unless, of course, it's Brights Grove, where there appears to be discrimination when it comes to development and progress. The Brights Grove Library has finally received a green light to be able to start fundraising for this project, but it still hasn't received the blessing of city hall for any physical progress as yet. And then there's the Huzevka proposal for the SW corner of Waterworks and Lakeshore – still waiting for their green light for 40-plus years so far. The public needs to know that for every single year that the city refuses this development project, they are losing an annual minimum of at least \$10 million. This is money that Sarnia desperately needs – and, yet, they are turning it away. Just think what this money could be used for – the Jackson Pool; the flood zone infrastructure, roads, and the Brights Grove Library & Community Centre to name but a few.

Under the new strong mayor powers, and in order to gain government funding, a promise was made to build another 1,000 homes by the year 2031. How can such a commitment be accomplished without the necessary funding and land?

A minimum of \$10 million a year is already being turned away by the mayor and, also, in order to find the necessary land (if Brights Grove is being excluded) they would have to inappropriately take land (designated for other purposes). Brights Grove already has the immediate capacity for another 1,200 homes, with a hookup just 30 feet away for services. However (according to the Watson Study -- prior to current uber-inflation) Sarnia would initially have to pay out about \$57million to get Area 2 ready for development and, even with the incoming 22% increased development-charge fees, the city will still be footing a final bill of about \$22-plus million. I'm

sure the taxpayers will say this is ridiculous to even consider when Brights Grove already has the necessary capacity. And, why is the city telling people where to live instead of letting them choose?

One person alone should not have the authority to make decisions with respect to the budget, or any other matters. If the mayor can override council, does this not resemble a dictatorship rather than a democracy?

The people of Sarnia elected eight people to represent them. If their decisions can be ignored or overturned by a powerful mayor, what purpose do they serve?