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COUNCIL REPORT DECEMBER 2002

By Ward 7 Councillor Ed Corrigan

THE BUDGET

It is budget time for City Council. There will be a number of meetings planned to discuss budget priorities. The difficulty with the budget is that some projects have cost over runs. For example increased costs on the Springbank Road project are partly due to higher construction costs but primarily to increased costs awarded for injurious affection. This is the compensation paid to affected home owners for lost trees, lost property value and related damages. This type of compensation has sky rocketed since the initial estimates were made. However, Council recently found a way to cut costs by removing 11 houses from the expropriation process. This should reduce the cost by about \$800,000 on the Springbank expansion project with little change to the road improvement.

Another issue before Council is new money for investing in infrastructure, \$12,600,000 from the Federal government, and \$32,000,000 from Ontario provincial government. In order to get this \$44,600,000 the City will have to spend approximately \$52 million of municipal money. If London does not participate in the infrastructure program, these funds raised in our community and set aside for our community, will be used elsewhere. To access our fair share of the Federal and Ontario infrastructure funds, taxes that Londoners have paid to the senior levels of government, we will have to spend municipal tax dollars. That is how the system works as both senior levels of government will not turn over the money raised from our community unless we spend it on projects they approve. This forces the City to match dollars and invest in infrastructure or lose the money. The other levels of government will not simply give the money to us so we can reduce property taxes or spend the money on Council's priorities.

It is a difficult decision. Do we lose the money (our money) or ante up some of our property tax dollars to recover our fair share of taxes paid to other levels of government that will be directed by other level of government's priorities? Do we alter our priorities to maximize the benefit of reclaiming Federal and Provincial tax dollars? Tough choices will have to be made as Council carefully reviews our budget. Clearly the City benefits from these new dollars but there is a cost. If we invest wisely in projects that create an ongoing economic return the City can benefit for years in the future. The expansion of Airport Road to four lanes to improve traffic flow on our major industrial artery is one such project. This project will support growth of the industrial tax base and help create new jobs.

The good news is that our property taxes are competitive with most cities in Ontario. In fact our tax rates compare very favorably and are lower than most, if not all, cities our size in Ontario. At least that is what our staff tells us in the comparative charts they provide. Financial review bodies, like Moody's and KPMG, report that our City is well managed from a financial

point of view.

It was projected that to maintain the existing level of service an 8% property tax increase was required. Council directed City Staff to limit the tax increase to 3 and 5 percent. Staff have found more than \$11 million in cost cutting measures. Hopefully more savings can be found without affecting services. On January 8, 2003, at City Hall a public meeting will be held on the budget and for you to let Council know about your views on City spending.

BYRON GRAVEL PITS

The issue of dump trucks in Byron is a long-standing problem. The gravel pits have been here since before Byron even existed and are governed by provincial legislation which protects the owner's rights to mine gravel for construction and making cement etc. They are legal and even if we changed the zoning they would remain as a preexisting legal nonconforming use. The main arterial roads in Byron - Commissioners, Springbank and Baseline unfortunately all run through residential areas. Gravel trucks have a legal right to use arterial roads and the City cannot stop them as we do not have the legal authority to prohibit the transport of legal goods. We can and do enforce a noise bylaw and keep after the pit operators on issues of dust, noise and speed etc.

Gravel pits are regulated by the Ontario Ministry of the Environment and provincial legislation. The pits will eventually run out of gravel that they can legally mine but not for many years. However, keep in mind, this same gravel probably helped build the house you live in. Eventually the plan is to turn the Byron gravel pits into a park and ski area.

I would like to hear your views on the budget and other City related matters. I can be reached at City Hall at 661-1558 or at home at 652-0973. My email address is ecorriga@city.london.on.ca.