

## **BUDGET AND PROPERTY TAXES – WORKING TO HOLD THE LINE ON INCREASES**

Last month, Council set the tax rates for 2017. Although determining budgets and setting tax rates is not really ‘fun’, building a plan to improve Ladysmith and drive higher performance within our organization, certainly is. Creating a sustainable growth plan with an eye to the future while holding the line on expenses is an exciting challenge. Challenge accepted! I feel our staff and council did an excellent job again this year.

If we must pay taxes, then it’s fair to expect that we get good value for what we’re paying. Core services, community planning and existing amenities should be well looked after first. We expect that downtown is kept clean, that we have safe, reliable water, and that our waste is processed in a responsible way. The future of Ladysmith should be well planned, building on broad consultation and engagement. Our recreation areas, parks and trails need to be well maintained for today and the next generation. The list goes on.

Taking into account all of these considerations, and many more, the 2017 budget process started last fall with a series of strategic planning sessions. Council first confirmed our strategic priorities for the year based on the 4 year plan adopted early in 2016 (<http://www.ladysmith.ca/docs/financial-documents/council-strategic-priorities-2016-to-2019.pdf>) and then worked with our staff team to set a workplan to accomplish this year’s priority list. The budget preparation then focused on allocating funds to all of those ‘expected’ items that we must deliver and other projects and capital investments that we intend to accomplish this year as part of our strategic plan.

At the same time, it was very important to everyone on Council that we keep property taxes to a minimum, and if possible to have no increase at all. I am very pleased that this year we will see a reduction of about 0.4% in property taxes based on assessed values. For an average single family dwelling with an assessed value of \$336,000, the municipal share of property tax you pay will actually go down by \$5.30 from 2016.

It is still important to keep in mind that many other factors will impact your final tax bill. If your assessment increased dramatically (more than the 11-12% average), your bill may still increase. There are also Regional Hospital taxes, our share of Cowichan Valley Regional District taxation, as well as an increase in parcel tax amounts to cover long-term improvements to Ladysmith’s sewer and water systems. Our budgeting is further impacted by the fact that we also need to factor in the budgets of two more agencies – the Ladysmith RCMP Detachment, and our share of the Vancouver Island Regional Library. They set their own budgets, which are added to our own **municipal** budget, before total tax bills are determined.

The Town’s total municipal taxation for 2017 is \$7.733 million. This will help pay for the ongoing costs of maintaining parks, streets and roads, running the Frank Jameson Community Centre, operating our sewer and water systems, supporting many local community organizations through grants-in-aid, and more. We also are continuing our asset management

program to save for the future by setting aside a percentage of taxation for capital projects and reserves for the long term replacement of larger assets.

In making our decisions about expenses and projects to include in the budget this year, we were very conscious of the fact that each additional \$70,000 in spending would mean a 1 per cent increase in taxes. That number strikes home because although it doesn't sound like a lot of money it has a big impact on affordability.

This year we have also budgeted \$14.77 million for capital projects, largely funded through grants. We are making generational, required investments in our community infrastructure through construction of our new water filtration plant, building a new bio-solids composting facility, expanding parking and improving the playground at Aggie Hall, extending the fire truck bays at the Fire Hall to accommodate a new fire/rescue truck, and finishing our Waterfront Area Plan Update.

We continue to supplement revenues from user fees and charges to help to offset the burden on property taxes. We will also continue to partner on economic development initiatives designed to attract more light industry, retail and other commercial enterprises to invest in Ladysmith, broadening our tax base while growing employment opportunities.

Later this year, we will also be taking an in depth, strategic look at the distribution of property taxes in our community and relative to other municipalities on Vancouver Island and in British Columbia. This is not straightforward as communities differ widely in the infrastructure and amenities they offer through the municipal government but it's an important part of our planning work. Our focus is on providing a good value for residents and a competitive edge for businesses looking to invest in the future of Ladysmith. This is a bigger story for another article, so watch for that.

The bottom line in all of this talk of budgets and property taxes is that we have been able to hold the line on property tax increases while making significant investments in the future of our community, laying a foundation for sustainable growth. We are building infrastructure that will provide excellent long-term value to residents. We are leading on asset management initiatives that will attract the business investment and generate economic activity the help offset the tax burden to residents in future years. I love it when a plan comes together!

### **Waterfront Area Plan Update – Uplifting and Inspiring**

One of the jewels of our community, and an opportunity that we know holds tremendous potential, is our waterfront. Last year, we embarked on an update to our Waterfront Area Plan in partnership with the Stz'uminus First Nation. In mid-March, along with many members of the Ladysmith and Stz'uminus communities, I was very fortunate to take part in the Waterfront Design Charrette. The weekend long session was focused on community planning, environmental restoration and economic development along our waterfront. What it really

was, however, was inspiring. People from all different perspectives sifting through TONNES of community input and feedback, sharing dreams and ideas, and truly working together in the spirit of Naut'sa mawt to boldly imagine the possibilities. I am truly floored by the work that was done in just over 2 days.

On night one, we received presentations on the environmental and seismic challenges, the long term and more recent history of the area, input from stakeholders and partners, volumes of community feedback from surveys and engagement... and more. On day two, we toured the site to put perspective on the information received, broke into teams with our "imagineering" hats on to put all of this information on paper, overlaying maps of the waterfront with concepts to share. We then convened as a large group together to review the breakout plans, provide feedback to each other and do it all over again. Into day three, we rolled up our work with more detail, reimagining what we had done the day before and putting a finer tip on some of the concepts that were rising to the surface. ...and finally on that Sunday afternoon we showed off our work to the community at the Open House.

Although there are too many details to recount, and much work still to do, some key elements were incorporated including an Arts, Culture and Heritage Park concept around the machine shop, a Stz'uminus Cultural Centre telling the history and celebrating the culture of Stz'uminus, park areas and people places for recreation and relaxation, additional marina space, commercial and residential possibilities and so much more. Through all of this work, one big theme was captured above all else... WE. The waterfront will be a WE place for all of us, accessible to all incomes, ages and abilities. This vision will be realized through the coming together of our shared Ladysmith and Stz'uminus communities and the strength of our partnership.

Armed with that kind of inspired motivation, we are already moving forward with the provincial and federal governments, exploring options to clean up the legacy left by decades of industrial use in the harbour. Staff and the project consultants are taking the work from the Design Charrette, as well as the input captured earlier in the project engagement sessions and surveys, to put together the first draft of the new plan. We intend to have a draft ready for review in June, and will hold more public events to get your feedback and input on this exciting work. Watch our website and social media for more details.

It's an exciting time for Ladysmith. We are dramatically improving outcomes in all key areas of community development economically, environmentally and socially. Our passionate volunteers and community engagement continue to inspire our council, our broader community and our neighbours. The momentum we have now continues to build as we work with senior levels of government, our Stz'uminus partners, our regional government, NGOs and the private sector to realize the great "blue sky" of potential that Ladysmith has on the horizon. All of our efforts continue to focus on the vision of working together to make Ladysmith a world class example of what a small town can be.

As always, follow me on Facebook ([www.facebook.com/solidplans](http://www.facebook.com/solidplans)) and on Twitter (@solidplans) for the latest. I also welcome your comments and questions direct to my inbox – [mayor@ladysmith.ca](mailto:mayor@ladysmith.ca)

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