

Swift Current Budget 2003 and Five - Year Plan

City Councillors approved Swift Current's 2003 budget on Monday and heard a proposal for an ambitious long-term plan that could result in \$55.5 million in capital spending over the next five years.

A major portion of the capital budget is devoted to maintaining and supporting Swift Current's infrastructure, such as roads, sidewalks and utilities.

However, the budget and five-year plan outlines funding for a wide range of projects. Among them are upgrades to the electrical and waterworks utilities, residential development, a new wastewater treatment plant, a proposed performing arts centre and Civic Centre expansion.

Councillor Al Bridal characterized the 2003 budget and its provisions for \$25.5 million in operating expenditures, and \$6.9 million in capital spending as maintaining the status quo, which contrast sharply with the five-year plan.

"It's very aggressive," said Bridal, who cautioned that, although the City has allocated money for a variety of projects, that doesn't necessarily mean they will get the green light.

It's important to note the five-year plan and every one of those things is going to have to be discussed at Council again, whether it's the Civic Centre expansion with the curling rink, whether it's the performing arts centre or whether it's the sewage treatment plant," he said.

"...As a five-year plan, it evolves, and things could move from one year to another, or things could be scrapped altogether."

In preparation for additional spending, City Council approved a tax increase – the first in 11 years. The five per cent increase to the municipal portion of property taxes will mean a homeowner with a \$45,000 home will pay about \$25 more a

year. One with a \$60,000 home will see an estimated increase of \$27 and a property owner whose home is valued at \$100,000 will pay an additional \$30.

That will be on top of increases announced earlier this week by Swift Current's two school boards. In 2002, the education portion of property taxes amounted to 63 per cent of total amount levied.

In its five-year projections the City's finance department believes the municipal tax increase will finance all the projects with the exception of the new \$14.7 million waste water treatment plant. That facility's funding would come from utility revenues, which will increase around the year 2005.

In 2004, a special levy will also be introduced to support the construction of a new regional hospital. It's estimated homeowners will see an increase of \$70 to \$100 annually on their property taxes.

Mayor Paul Elder said that, after a decade of holding the line on taxes, City Council had little choice but to increase them, partly in view of demands by community groups for improved and new facilities.

"We just can't manage to go without (an increase) any longer, when we're faced with having to build a new sewage treatment plant at \$15 million and things of this nature. There's just no way of holding the line for 10 years. I mean, every year the costs go up. Employee costs go up. Inflationary costs go up and we have been scrapping to the bone and we just find no more room to do that," Elder said.

"I think it's been a very responsible and diligent administration that has looked after things all of these years and kept the costs down. Now we're clearly looking to spur the economy, to get things moving and some of the actions we're taking will

certainly do that. The new hospital, I think, is just wonderful and so essential to our community. That will be one of the central themes that we have to develop our community.”

Councillor Bob Jamieson said he was excited about the budget and the five-year plan for the city.

“I think it’s one of the most aggressive and also visionary budgets that I’ve ever seen in the City of Swift Current. I think we’ve got the framework there for a lot of great development in the future and something that should carry Swift Current will into the future as an even more wonderful place to live than it is now – if that’s possible,” he said.

Jamieson also defended the tax hike, given the increased public pressure for improved facilities.

“These things can’t happen any other way. There’s no magic involved. If you want the facilities, you have to pay for them,” he said.

HIGHLIGHTS OF 2003 BUDGET AND FIVE-YEAR PLAN

- \$14.7 million for a new wastewater treatment plant, which if approved, could be in operation in 2005.
- Over the next five years, \$7 million for waterworks utility upgrades with \$1 million budgeted this year.
- Over the next five years, \$6 million for roads, sidewalks and bridges with \$1` million budgeted this year.
- \$5 million to expand the Centennial Civic Centre that will house a new curling rink, provide

extra seating for the arena and a modern public area, work which, if approved, could be completed in 2005.

- A planned commitment of \$2.5 million for a performing arts centre. Currently, several options are being considered and developed to determine which one is the best financially and also addresses the public’s needs. \$30,000 is budgeted this year.

- Over the next five years, \$2.3 million for the Light and Power utility with \$350,000 budgeted this year to complete what is called an “overhead ring feeder”, which will allow for the provision of cost-effective, reliable power to the whole service area.

- \$599,000 this year to provide new lots for residential development.

- Over five years, \$1.47 million to maintain and expand the city’s parks and green spaces, with \$331,000 budgeted this year. Projects over the life of the plan include the continued development of Highland Park, a new skateboard park and the continuation of the Chinook Parkway.

- \$159,000 this year for the Swift Current Agricultural and Exhibition Association for grandstand upgrades.

(Note: City Council is not bound by recommendation contained in the five-year plan)

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