

# Swift Current taxes increased three per cent

The City of Swift Current points to rising operating costs to explain the three per cent increase to the municipal portion of property taxes in 2005.

Increases due to labour settlements, utilities, fuel and higher policing and insurance costs were cited for the move, which marks only the second time in 12 years the tax has risen.

John Wall was among councilors who pointed out these higher costs are beyond the city's control.

"It comes to a point where I don't think we have a choice. It's either (increase tax) or make drastic cuts on programs and I'm not sure the people of Swift Current would like to see us do that," Wall said.

For homeowners whose properties have a fair value of \$100,000 for assessment purposes, the increase will add \$19 to their tax bills.

"The fact of the matter is this is a reasonable increase and I'm always prepared to deal with a reasonable increase," said Councilor Tim Keene.

"Quite frankly, it would have been silly to have no increase this year because we have to have certain things done and to have no increase would have made no sense. Again, you have to deal with the reality that some outside influences dictate to a degree what your budget is going to do."

Director of finance Tim Marcus, who presented the 2005 municipal budget at Tuesday's City Council meeting, said servicing the city's debt also has resulted in increased costs.

Today, the city's debt stands at \$30 million, compared to five years ago when it sat in the range of \$3 million to \$5 million.

The City of Swift Current has been borrowing to pay for a variety of capital projects, including the \$15 million wastewater treatment plant currently under construction. Other big ticket items include the planned Centennial Civic Centre improvements and its expansion to include a curling facility. Although the final price tag for that project hasn't been determined, the city has projected the cost at \$7 million.

Six per cent of the city's \$29.8 million 2005 operating budget will service Swift Current's debt, Marcus told reporters.

"Yes, the debt is high but I kind of come from the school that you've got to borrow to kind of get ahead. It's impossible to save up for those big ticket items," Councilor Gord Budd said.

"Yes, we're in a lot of debt but we're servicing that debt with a very small portion of our total operating budget and servicing it very well, especially in comparison when you look provincially and federally at the amount of taxpayers' monies that go to servicing huge debts out there," Budd added.

"As a business person, flags always come up and I like to be very cautious. I think it's necessary to be cautious for this because it's a lot of money, but I have faith in our administration. I think they will continue to monitor this," Wall said.

Wall expressed optimism revenues will grow over the next five years.

Increases to the population will result in a broader tax base and more cash will flow to the city as tax concession agreements expire with businesses and participants in Swift Current's in-fill housing program, he said.

Putting the city's most recent budgets and its spending initiatives in a broader context, Councilor Jerrod Schafer suggested to reporters the 2003 municipal election marked a turning point for Swift Current.

"The reason why there was so much activity and emotion surrounding that election was because people wanted to see growth. They wanted to see economic development and they wanted to see expansion in this community. We'd gone through a long period of time with no tax increases but we hadn't seen population growth. We hadn't seen a whole pile of new businesses or new commercial development in the community," Schafer said.

"So I think basically what we're starting to see now is we have to spend a little bit of money, but it's a good investment, in terms of – like I said – all the economic development that's coming," he added.

"We want to have Swift Current become a city of choice and there has to be a balance between tax increases and some of the objectives that we want to do within the city," Mayor Sandy Larson said of the budget.

"We want to grow out city. We want to become a very vibrant city. We want to offer different things to our citizens that we don't provide now."

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