

Strategy's funding reduced; Spending on new staff to boost immigration cut from C-K budget

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Although considered a strategic direction, council opted not to create additional positions to boost immigration within Chatham-Kent.

Municipal staff had recommended an immigration attraction project lead and an administrative assistant be approved during Tuesday's budget deliberations.

The positions would have cost \$124,900 and \$45,100, respectively, including training and benefits.

Acting chief administrative officer Gerry Wolting said immigrants bring skills to the workforce, thus supporting economic development. "Investment opportunities look for labour opportunities," he said.

Wolting said the City of Sarnia also added similar positions to their economic development department.

Last year, Chatham-Kent council set a goal of attracting 1,000 new immigrants.

Chatham Coun. Marjorie Crew said those at the table already agreed to the immigration idea in principal.

She said it needed to be properly funded in order to make the objective a reality.

"We're not having any more babies," she said. "We've got to find a different way."

However, other councillors believed the current economic climate wasn't ready for more people.

"Who's going to support them in the meantime?" said South Kent Coun. Karen Herman. "I see a struggling existing workforce."

Although council defeated the positions, South Kent Coun. Art Stirling offered a successful motion to add \$40,000, which will allow the municipality to work with groups - such as the Cultural Coalition of Chatham-Kent - on a strategy.

"I don't want to abandon the strategic direction," he said.

A heritage planner and clerical assistant were also rejected Tuesday, resulting in a savings of \$110,992.

However, Chatham Coun. Anne Gilbert asked that \$50,000 be allotted to contract out duties legislated under the Heritage Act, saying volunteers were feeling the pinch.

Council did add a position - a tourism product development co-ordinator - at a cost of \$52,894.

Another area cut on Tuesday was travel and training, with Stirling asking for a \$125,000 reduction in discretionary spending.

He admitted most of this is worthwhile, but said this year was "exceptional."

Stirling said he had confidence in administrators to apply this as they see fit.

"I have no desire to micromanage," he said. "I want to rely on our managers."

"We have an opportunity here - to exercise more due diligence."

Wolting said he sympathized with the tough financial position council was in, but cautioned that cutting back on staff development wasn't sustainable.

A recorded vote was held for Stirling's motion, which passed 10-7.

Voting in favour were councillors Stirling, Herman, Jim Brown, Bryon Fluker, Steve Pinsonneault, Doug Sulman, Larry Mansfield Robbins, Frank Vercooteren, Don Clarke and Mayor Randy Hope.

Opposed were councillors Crew, Gilbert, Joe Faas, Brian King, Tom McGregor, Sheldon Parsons and Bill Weaver. Chatham Coun. Steve Pickard was absent.

With Tuesday's cuts, the tax increase sits at 4.7 per cent, down from Monday's 5.1 per cent. Budget deliberations continue tonight.

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