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Neighbours concerned construction will damage trees

By Tammy Schneider

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The long-awaited construction of a mixed-use building on Queen Street is causing concern with one of the site's immediate neighbours.

Re/Max realtor Connor Coultrup, who shares office space with his father Russ Coultrup in the neighbouring building, and building owner David Brown, have said that if the building plan goes ahead as approved, it will result in the destruction of three 100-year-old evergreen trees on Brown's property.

The way the plans read, the driveway into the new development will run along Brown's property. Because the driveway can be cut to run directly along the property line, a zero lot line, construction will require that the land be cut on a diagonal line that actually runs under Brown's property. If this happens, the roots of the trees will be severed, and the trees will die.

Connor Coultrup says the simplest solution, since no construction has started as of yet, is to simply flip the plans and place the driveway along the north side of the property. There will be no loss of space or cost to the developer.

On Oct. 21, they tried to serve the developer, Ashok Dhir of Mejer Holdings Inc., with a no-trespass order, which he would not accept, and notified the OPP of Dhir's intention to enter their property.

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Bruce County mothers, some accompanied by their children, gathered to stage a peaceful protest in Port Elgin on Oct. 24. Story continued on page 9. (Tammy Schneider photo)

County 'smooths out' 2021 budget increase but not ready to pass bylaw yet

By Pauline Kerr

Council, as a whole, expressed satisfaction with the proposed 2021 budget that will see an increase of 3.95 per cent over last year.

However, the bylaw likely won't be passed until the new year, with some information from the province still to come in.

The 3.95 budget increase presented at the Oct. 22 meeting of the corporate services committee will give lower-tier municipalities a figure to work with as they discuss their own budgets.

Edward Henley, director of corporate services, explained that by doing a five-year budget for 2021-2025, with only the 2021 budget being approved and subsequent years being forecasts, staff were able to "smooth out" a substantial budget increase over a few years without cuts to services or a large hike in the levy.

Initially, council was looking at an 11.73 per cent levy increase for 2021. This was revised for the next budget meeting to 6.95 per cent. In his report to the committee, Henley said these levy increases "did not include an

estimated property base growth rate of 1.50 per cent for 2021 or 1.00 for 2022-2025."

The first presentation of the budget showed an 11.73 per cent increase for 2021 but less than one per cent increases for the next two years. By shifting some of the levy increase to 2022 and 2023, council would avoid a major increase in 2021 while rebuilding reserves. The latter was identified as a priority by council.

It remains unknown whether the Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund (OCIF) grant, which ends in 2020, will be continued for 2021. Some members of county council are confident it will be, but nothing official has been announced. The OCIF grant in 2020 was \$566,000.

Henley said that shifting budget increases forward over two years could result in safety concerns for large projects such as bridges. What makes it work is temporarily borrowing from reserves - \$750,000 in 2021 and another \$750,000 in 2022. This avoids a large swing in the levy that would result from doing it in one year, he explained.

The two reserves to fund the

internal borrowing would be the non-departmental facilities reserve (\$910,000) and the working fund (\$590,000). Henley said both reserves have been looked at and both have sufficient funds for proposed budgeted items. The drawback is there will be limited funds for unbudgeted items.

The cost of borrowing internally is only slightly less than what the commercial bank rate would be, but is more flexible and efficient than a formal infrastructure loan, Henley said. It has potentially fewer days to pay interest and no penalty for repaying the loan early.

Henley pointed out that the five-year budget aims to start correcting a trend seen over the past several years of using reserves to minimize levy increases. "The downward trend was moving away from the median average of reserves held by other comparable counties and was not sustainable," he said.

The 3.95 per cent increase in the levy for 2021 is not carved in stone. Henley noted that if OCIF funding comes through, the levy could be

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Bylaw likely not to be passed until 2021

(continued from page 1)

reduced to 2.82 per cent.

Henley said he wouldn't have the final numbers until Dec. 15, when Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) provides figures on this year's assessments.

County Coun. Anne Eadie, mayor of Kincardine, commended Henley for "the clarity you've provided. I'm pleased with the way you've smoothed it out."

However, she expressed concern about reserves and stressed the need to replenish them.

Eadie also noted that next year, MPAC increases will come in. "Shifting too much for next year is a concern - we anticipate substantial increases in both residential and agricultural (property assessments)."

County Coun. Luke Charbonneau, mayor of Saugeen Shores, said he didn't think the county should wait until 2023 to start rebuilding re-

serves. The idea of "borrowing from depleted reserves" didn't sit well with him. He expressed confidence there'll be an OCIF announcement coming and "this will be a three per cent budget."

Charbonneau characterized the shifting of levy increases to other years as "a mitigation, not a solution. We're not heading in the right direction."

County Coun. Robert Buckle, mayor of South Bruce, said he liked one proposal that had been made - a special levy for infrastructure. "People like to know," he said.

He stated his wish to keep the levy increase for 2021 a

low as possible, noting that because of COVID-19, a lot of people have lost their jobs. "We should try to keep it down as much as possible," he said.

The state of the county's reserves was a major concern for County Coun. Steve Hammell of Arran-Elderslie. "At the end of 2021, Arran-Elderslie will have more

in reserves than the county," he said. What's needed is a "team effort in spending less money."

County Coun. Janice Jackson, mayor of South Bruce Peninsula, agreed that "delaying bad news to other years" is not the answer. "We need to sharpen our pencils" and "cut back on a lot of things."

Eadie said she, too, didn't like to "see reserves so low" but said OCIF funding would mitigate that.

The meeting closed with a discussion on growth in the county. Warden Mitch Twolan, mayor of Huron-Kinloss, said residential growth is up at least 25 per cent; there's an opportunity to take that growth and replenish reserves. "As a county, we're growing." Some of that growth has been fueled by COVID-19. Some urban people have seen the benefits of moving to rural Ontario.

"This is a good budget," he continued, adding, "I think we'll get



Donation supports Victoria Park Gallery

The Victoria Park Gallery was very grateful to the Power Workers Union when presented with a donation for \$1,000. The Gallery provides a quiet place where people can get away from some of life's present stresses and enjoy the unique and beautiful art created by members of the community. The money will be used to promote the Gallery and this local support will enable it to remain open and provide an outlet for new artists. Tracy Neitzel, on the left, from the Power Workers Union, presented a cheque to Ruth Nicholson from the Gallery. (Submitted by Lisa Farrell)

OCIF. I'm supportive of this budget."

He agreed with Eadie that there needs to be

a discussion prior to the 2022 budget on what services are actually needed, and where cuts

are possible.

The next meeting is scheduled for Nov. 5.

"I think it's a good idea; commercial space is needed and residential space is needed."

(continued from page 1)

Coultrup said they are really trying to work with the developer but have only been told that the flip of the design won't work.

"We have no problem with the development at all," said Coultrup. "I think it's a good idea; commercial space is needed and residential space is needed."

Coultrup says he re-

alizes they have a very small window of time to intervene and have the destruction of the trees stopped. The group has attempted to contact the Municipality to see what recourse they have

to work out a compromise, but have been told to speak directly with the developer. Once the roots are cut, it will be too late.

"We're not trying to hold up development,

change it or stop it, just flip it," said Coultrup. "Simply flipping it would make everybody happy. How many trees do we have left on our main street?"

Coultrup said they would be happy to pay whatever costs were incurred to save the trees.

In a phone interview with *The Kincardine Independent* on Oct. 23, Dhir said he had offered to plant six trees to replace the three that would be lost.

"I'm going there to see my architect right now, and see if we can do something to save the trees," said Dhir.

Asked about what his next step would be, he indicated he would call the building owner (Brown) after speaking with his architect.

As of press time, the trees remain on Brown's property and the issue has not been resolved. *The Independent* will continue to follow this story as it progresses.

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Landowner David Brown (left) and tenant Russ Coultrup have chained a "save me" sign to one of the three trees that will be destroyed if the construction of a mixed-use building goes ahead as planned. (Liz Small photo)