

# Hamilton police want budget increase

Hamilton police are banking on a 5.25 per cent budget increase for 2013, a spike that, if approved, would dash the city's hopes to avoid hiking its own spending plan.

Police released a breakdown of their budget Friday, showing they're looking to spend \$143 million next year.

The \$7.12-million hike translates into a 1 per cent tax increase.

Most of the increase — \$6.57 million — will go toward improved salaries and benefits.

All city departments and agencies were asked to stick to a zero per cent budget increase.

City finance chief Rob Rossini warned Friday the city will “absolutely not” be able to achieve a property tax freeze if it heeds the police request.

City councillors have very little control over the police budget. Due to a process laid out in the Ontario Police Services Act, council's only choice is to either adopt the entire police budget as a whole or reject it altogether. Councillors have no authority to scrutinize individual expenses or approve only some areas of the budget.

If council rejects the police's request, the budget is ultimately determined through an arbitration process.

Last year, Hamilton police asked for a 3.4 per cent hike, which worked out to a \$4.4-million boost over its 2011 budget — the force's lowest budget increase request in a decade.

In 2011, the police received a 5 per cent increase, despite council's repeated pleas to the police board to scale back. City councillors took the unprecedented step of sending the budget back to the police board, giving it two weeks to report back with a revised request. The police board refused, saying anything lower than 5 per cent would mean taking officers off the streets.

Councillor Terry Whitehead, who sits on the police board, says Hamilton isn't the only municipality struggling to cover ballooning policing costs.

“It's pretty clear that municipalities across Ontario have been challenged by police budgets,” he said. “I believe that the Arbitration Act has to be reviewed, with the context that taxpayers don't have unlimited dollars to provide for police budgets.”

Whitehead, who spent several days this week in Ottawa at the Federation of Canadian Municipalities conference, says one of the points of discussion among attendees was

the need to clearly delineate between federal and provincial policing responsibilities — and the resulting costs.

“Should Hamilton be policing the airport or should that be the RCMP? Should Hamilton have a marine unit or should that be the responsibility of the federal government?” he said.

Whitehead said as a member of the police board, he can't discuss any specifics about this year's budget.

The Hamilton Police force currently employs 794 police officers and 281.5 civilian members (including part-time staff).

The 2013 budget accounts for 20 new officers and one civilian officer — an Action Team stenographer.

Councillor Lloyd Ferguson, who led the 2011 charge to send the police budget back for further review, called the police's request for 5.25 per cent “unaffordable.”

“With crime numbers trending down, there's going to have to be a pretty strong case for additional officers,” he said.

Ferguson also points out that in negotiations with its other employee unions, council approved the same wage increases: a freeze in the first year of the contract, then 0.9 per cent each year thereafter.

“We have a guideline that we've used all year for our collective agreements. I would expect police to follow that through, and if not, we need to test the arbitration process.”

But Hamilton Police Association CEO Mike Thomas said he certainly sees a need for the staffing increase. “It's a very busy city and it would alleviate some of the pressures on the officers right now.”

Hamilton police collective agreements expire in January. In the absence of a negotiated new settlement, police are establishing a salary contingency to cushion whatever the impact might be. “The budget impact on salaries and wages for 2013 is estimated at \$2.84 million,” the budget report states.

Thomas said the association has “only had very preliminary discussions with the board” and expects discussions around contract negotiations will begin in early 2013.

The budget will go before the Hamilton Police Services Board at its Tuesday meeting.

Hamilton police spokesperson Catherine Martin declined to comment on the budget before the meeting.

Councillors will deal with the budget proposal during their 2013 budget deliberations.

During Tuesday's meeting, Police Chief Glenn De Caire will present the budget to the board. The public is invited to attend, but the board isn't seeking any input from the community.

This is the third year the budget document has been released and debated publicly following a push by The Spectator and the community for transparency.

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