

Reeves Message

M.D. Council begins 2015 budget deliberations

Municipal District of Bonnyville Council has to make some tough decisions as it begins its 2015 budget deliberations.

While there seems to be this perception that the M.D. is flush with cash and can support unlimited projects in neighbouring municipalities, Council's first daylong, line by line budget discussion paints a different picture. After a full day of discussions, the M.D. is about \$5 million in the hole and Council has to make some hard decisions regarding what projects we will fund in 2015 to pass a balanced budget.

Council's initial discussions included all the wish lists from Councillors and department directors, along with a lengthy wish list from neighbouring municipalities which was collected at a recent meeting with representatives from all the communities present. It took Council a lot of time to go through the wish list. By the end there were a lot of projects marked with 'maybe' and 'no' for 2015.

We're practical politicians. One of Council's priorities is to find, purchase and store gravel at a good price because we have an annual gravelling budget of approximately \$4 million. Gravel is a costly commodity that is laid down every year, and it is an expense that tends not to stay on the roads as long as we would like it to. A kilometre of paved road costs just over \$1 million. Then you have to contrast those practical needs with a request for funding from a neighbouring Mayor who wants to build a large pool and leisure centre that is projected to cost up to \$60 million. When it comes to serving our residents, it's not hard to see what the Council vote will be.

In 2015 M.D. Council has set aside funds for partnering opportunities with neighbouring municipalities. Council's priority is to deliver services to M.D. residents, but as a member of our integrated communities, the M.D. will collaborate and partner with community organizations and neighbouring municipalities to enhance services for all residents throughout the region.

While the proposed draft budget is projected to be approximately \$89 million, the needs, wants and wishes add up quickly. Council spends as much time debating a \$60,000 lawn mower purchase as it does discussing \$2 million worth of paving. Once Council debates all the requested line items, we start prioritizing.

Council remains committed to preserving a reserve fund to enable the M.D. to operate without borrowing funds until mid-September when the 2015 taxes are collected. This was a standard set by previous Councils, and one that the present Council continues to uphold. Once again, there seems to be many politicians in our neighbouring communities who question our "large" reserve. And they want to spend it. The present M.D. Council believes our residents do not want to see the M.D. in debt. Council has been able to meet the needs of our residents without incurring a lot of debt, and we hope to continue doing so into the future.

In order to balance the 2015 budget, Council will schedule some projects into a three to five year plan. For other projects, such as the \$23 million La Corey North Resource Road overlay, Council will look for funding grants from provincial and federal sources. Local industry also provides partnering dollars for road construction and paving projects, allowing the M.D. dollars to go a lot further.

For the second budget go-round, Council has asked all the department directors to find some cost savings. This is when those smaller items start adding up.

M.D. Council's priority is road maintenance and construction. With over 2,600 kilometres of roads, the majority of which are gravel, it does not take long to eat through a budget. It is always a balance between the upkeep of roads and other quality of life items, such as recreation.

To outside politicians, it may seem like the M.D. has enough money to work with and extra to share. But Council certainly hears differently from our residents. I know there is a long list of roads that need to be fixed and upgraded and it is going to take a lot of years to correct the problems.

Budgeting is about balance. For 2015, M.D. Council is doing its best to balance the needs and wants of its residents, while also being a good neighbour by partnering on projects in neighbouring municipalities that serve M.D. residents.