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For immediate release

Nov. 22, 2023

Here are the highlights from the Lanark County Council meeting held Nov. 22, 2023.

2024 Budget Approved: The 2024 Lanark County budget – themed “Bridging the Gap” – was approved with an overall budget increase of 5.1 per cent. After an estimated assessment growth of 2.2 per cent, the tax increase is reduced to 2.9 per cent.

The county will collect \$43 million from property taxpayers this year, up from \$40.9 million last year. Estimated gross expenditures are \$121 million. “A common theme among all departments was the impact of inflation on wages, contractual services and capital projects,” said CAO Kurt Greaves. “With the challenge of staff recruitment and retention, maintaining service levels and capital investment, the net levy increase is below current inflation rates of 3.8 per cent in September 2023.”

At the special budget meeting held Nov. 17, Greaves outlined competing interests that must be considered, including expected service levels, infrastructure deficit, fiscal imbalance from downloaded services without adequate funding (ambulance, social services, roads and farm and forest rebates), and the goal of maintaining low tax rates.

Some highlights in the 2024 budget include:

- Long-term Care: Industry-wide labour shortages continue to affect Lanark Lodge, along with increasingly higher levels of care needed and significant inflation pressures. There has been a positive decrease in supplies related to COVID protocols.
- Public Works: \$3.85 million for Blakeney Bridge rehabilitation was funded from reserves, and 29 km of rehabilitation projects and 17 km of pavement preservation planned. Inflation and continued increases in insurance premiums are creating pressure. The Climate Action Plan has dedicated \$200,000 for implementation activities, including the Better Homes program.
- Social Services: The Ontario Works Employment Services Transformation is being phased in and includes an upload to province but reduced funding, despite an increased caseload. An additional 28 rent-geared-to-income units are planned through Carebridge, and Children’s Services continued implementation of \$10-per-day child care.
- Emergency Services: There is continued commitment to local hospitals (\$380,000); replacement of 23 defibrillators for the paramedic service and fire dispatch enhancements of \$430,000.
- Economic Development: There is a dedicated recruitment and settlement officer position and marketing plan (\$150,000 – grant and shared costs with Renfrew County); \$125,000 for capital trail improvements; \$30,000 to finalize agreement for K&P Trail; \$120,000 for official plan update; and the tourism rebranding project continuation.
- Administration and other non-departmental: There is an increase in investment revenues, funds earmarked for council-directed community grants, a provincial gas tax grant increase of \$100,000, \$90,000 in accessibility funding for Lanark Transportation Association and \$60,000 for compensation review.



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“The 2024 budget aims to ‘bridge the gap’ between inflationary pressures and maintaining service levels at reasonable tax rates, in conjunction with addressing the key priorities identified by council for the 2023-2026 remaining term,” Greaves said.

The public works budget represents 37 per cent of the county levy, followed by emergency services at 22 per cent, social services and housing at 19 and long-term care at 11. Administration/non-departmental and economic development make up the remainder.

Greaves noted that to meet asset replacement costs, \$15.4 million needs to be invested annually into capital. The 2024 budget includes \$15.6 million for capital investment. The county’s debt related to Lanark County Housing Corporation taking over two non-profit housing providers continues to decline and the loan matures in 2026. “The practice has been to self-finance major projects from reserves and pay back reserves, which has the most benefit to the ratepayer,” Greaves explained. “There has been no new debt issued since 2010 and there is no new debt in the 2024 budget.”

With assessment growth at 2.2 per cent, residential ratepayers with a property assessed at \$500,000 can expect to see an increase of \$56 on the county portion of their tax bill. The bill also includes the local municipal and the education portions. Tax rates and ratios for 2024 will be set by county council soon. For more information, contact Kurt Greaves, CAO, at 1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 1101.

Supporting Human Resources Strategies at Lanark Lodge: Lanark County Council has directed Lanark Lodge staff to explore strategies to support staffing at the long-term care home. This follows a report on the health human resource crisis presented by Long-Term Care Director Carey Duncan to the community services committee earlier this month.

Duncan said the significant lack of health human resources has been further exacerbated in the last year due to retirements, employee burn-out, greater sick time and workplace injury and a lack of people to replace them. “These issues are faced by the health care industry as a whole,” she said. “Hospitals, long-term care homes, and community agencies are all competing for the same small pool of available people.”

She said traditional recruitment efforts have not been able to fill the need, adding challenges in rural areas are magnified by lack of housing and transportation, and the use of temporary staffing agencies is not a sustainable way to fill gaps. She explained the long-term care sector is broadening the search for workers.

Duncan explained many homes are working with international recruitment agencies to bring internationally educated, full-time health-care workers from abroad. This can cost up to \$8,000 per person, and includes sourcing, screening, language testing, application for work permit or visa, and more. The employer is responsible for helping to ensure there is reasonable accommodation for the worker. “Given the limited housing currently available in Lanark County, this could be a barrier,” she said, adding the Lodge is investigating options such as renovating space currently rented to an agency to create temporary staff accommodations.

“At this time, up to 15 Internationally Educated Healthcare Workers are required and, while the cost of
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bringing them to the Lodge is not insignificant, the investment means more sustainable, longer-term employees,” she said.

Council also approved the inclusion of \$200,000 in the 2024 budget for conversion costs for the space if required. Details on the initiative will be brought back to council for consideration. For more information, contact Carey Duncan, Director of Long-Term Care, at 1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 7101.

Issuing Affordable Housing RFP: Lanark County Council has asked staff to issue a request for proposals for one-time capital funding of \$1.5 million to be coupled with funding from other partners to build, own and operate affordable housing units in Lanark County or the Town of Smiths Falls.

Director of Social Services Emily Hollington explained the community services committee expressed an interest in receiving affordable housing development incentive options from staff. Recommendations are provided in the county’s “Municipal Tools to Support Affordable Housing” report from March 2023 to guide the county, local municipalities and Smiths Falls on ways to encourage development of housing that is affordable to low- and moderate-income households.

Hollington said the one-time capital grant would be taken from reserves and be used for capital costs to construct affordable rental units, up to \$150,000 per unit. The proponent would construct, own and operate an apartment building dedicating a specified number of units to affordable housing over an extended period, such as 25 years. Rent would be charged at, or less than, affordable rates (defined at \$982 per month) and only increase as per the allowable annual rental guidelines.

“There would be a high preference for proponents able to deliver more deeply affordable rent or who have a willingness to house directly from the By-Name List of homeless clients,” Hollington said. There would also be preference for projects that leverage other capital funds dedicated to affordable housing, have enhanced accessibility features and contain one-bedroom units. The preference is for non-profit organizations, but the program would also be available to for-profit businesses.

The RFP will include additional incentives, such as grants in lieu of county development charges and county property taxes for the affordable units for the duration of the affordability period. These would be offered as operating grants. Following selection of the successful proponent, the identified local municipality would be encouraged to offer such incentives. Staff have also been asked to provide a draft ongoing affordable rental housing incentive program. For more information, contact Emily Hollington, Director of Social Services, at 1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 2101.

CMHC Funding to Support Maintenance: Lanark County Council has accepted the terms of the National Housing Co-Investment Fund (NHCF) and authorized staff to enter into an agreement with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) for \$4.97 million to support the repair and renewal of units in the Lanark County Housing Corporation (LCHC) portfolio over three years from 2024 to 2026.

At the community services committee meeting earlier this month, Director of Social Services Emily Hollington explained CMHC has extended the offer to the county to complete necessary repairs to extend the life of its housing stock through this fund. “Like Lanark County, CMHC is committed to preserving existing affordable housing stock and housing the most vulnerable. CMHC seeks to build

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upon existing funding frameworks to make further progress on this goal.”

The funding is a 70/30 municipal/federal split and LCHC’s share would be about \$3.4 million. Conditions include offering 30 per cent of units below 80 per cent median market rent for 20 years, showing a 25-per cent minimum portfolio energy consumption and greenhouse gas reduction relative to past or pre-repair levels, and 20 per cent of units must meet or exceed provincial accessibility standards.

The funding offer supports LCHC’s 10-year capital plan and includes work that has been budgeted for each year. Hollington indicated the terms and conditions are achievable. For more information, contact Emily Hollington, Director of Social Services, at 1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 2101.

Changes to Children’s Services Operating Funds: Lanark County Council has approved a revision in the Children’s Services general operating funding policy as of Jan 1, 2024 that would address some challenges faced by child-care providers.

At the community services committee meeting earlier this month, Director of Social Services Emily Hollington explained the operating funding is used to support the cost of operating licensed child-care programs, reduce child-care fees, stabilize service levels and improve access to high-quality affordable child-care services. It can be used for wages, benefits, resources, nutrition, supplies, maintenance, administration, utilities, lease and occupancy costs.

Hollington said since the implementation of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system in 2022, many challenges have arisen for licensed child care. One issue is child-care rates have been frozen at March 2022 levels. Despite pressure from inflation, centres have limited ability to increase their revenue. Hollington said four centres in the county have been operating in deficit positions. A second issue is retaining and recruiting employees. She said some providers have very low frozen child-care rates coupled with very low employee wages and no financial availability to increase pay rates to attract and retain skilled staff.

Staff recommended creating an operating deficit and wage improvement fund be established at the beginning of each year, with the county’s full Early Learning and Child Care allocation dedicated to this. The county’s allocation in 2023 was \$595,524. The fund may be used when exceptional circumstances result in child-care operations being in a deficit or financially vulnerable position, and also when staff wages for Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECE) and RECE assistants are below the Lanark County average wage as of August 2023. For more information, contact Emily Hollington, Director of Social Services, at 1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 2101.

Support for EOWC Regional Housing Plan: Lanark County Council has supported in principle the Eastern Ontario Wardens’ Caucus (EOWC) 7 in 7 Regional Housing Plan and is contributing \$36,000 towards the project.

At the corporate services committee meeting earlier this month, CAO Kurt Greaves explained affordable and attainable housing has been the number one priority of the EOWC for the last two years. Deliverables in the project include:

- Templates for funding opportunities

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- Regional marketing
- Exploration of financial aggregators to support the project
- Establishing best practices across eastern Ontario
- Developing an immigration, workforce, skills and housing strategy
- Mitigation strategies for operational risks associated with housing
- Assessment of impacts the project may have on local communities
- Development of an implementation plan and strategic integration plan for review by the end of March 2024

Greaves said these deliverables are needed for the project to move forward while providing information and resources to support housing portfolios of EOWC members. Lanark County is one of 13 upper-tier municipalities that are part of the EOWC. For more information, contact Kurt Greaves, CAO, at 1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 1101.

National Housing Day Proclaimed: Lanark County Council has declared Nov. 22, 2023 to be National Housing Day in Lanark County.

The proclamation recognizes the critical role housing plays in citizens' lives and its profound impact on overall well-being. The federal government has designated this day as a reminder of the importance of access to safe, adequate and affordable housing.

"National Housing Day recognizes the important work done by housing partners to improve access to housing for everyone in Canada," the proclamation states. "Lanark County recognizes the many partners that play an important role in providing safe and affordable housing opportunities to those in need."

For more information, contact Jasmin Ralph, Clerk, at 1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 1502.

Council Supports Funds for Transportation Study: Lanark County Council has included \$26,400 in the 2024 budget to support part of the cost of a county-wide transportation study. This follows a presentation to the community services committee earlier this month by Marilyn Bird of the Lanark Rural Transportation Working Group.

Bird said a study completed in 2016 identified challenges in the county related to a lack of transportation options. Concerns were raised that the information would now be outdated. She provided examples of relevant studies completed in other municipalities and highlighted success stories, including fixed routes to various employment centres or between local municipalities, as well as on-demand services.

Bird noted research showing rural residents tend to spend a larger percentage of their income on transportation due to longer distances and poorer roads. As well, there is a lower percentage of elderly people living in rural townships because they must move to towns due to transportation challenges. "The county may have difficulty attracting sufficient in-migrants unless there is strategic action on transit, housing and recreation." Bird added the feasibility study will help the county take advantage of other funding opportunities.

For more information, contact Jasmin Ralph, Clerk, at 1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 1502.



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Community Safety and Well-being Planning Moves Ahead: Lanark County Council received an update about an update to the Community Safety and Well-being (CSWB) Plan for Lanark County and Smiths Falls. At the community services committee meeting earlier this month, CSWB Coordinator Stephanie Gray explained the original plan was a community-driven effort led by the CSWB Advisory Committee that began in 2016. It was approved by local municipalities in early 2019, just before the province mandated municipalities to complete a plan by 2021.

CSWB plans identify priority risks in communities, strategies to mitigate them and measurable outcomes. The current plan identified 12 priority risk areas. Gray explained the data used is pre-pandemic, prompting an update. A progress report released in September highlighted a range of program creation and expanded services that have occurred since the plan was developed, as well as advocacy efforts with the province by Lanark County Council, increased collaboration and creative solutions that evolved as a result of the pandemic, and ongoing training and education for local organizations and agencies.

Gray indicated four main themes and preliminary risks have been identified as part of the plan update:

- Health (physical, mental, substance use; including access to care)
- Affordability and quality of life (income, employment, housing and homelessness, transportation, food security, climate change and environment, belonging and civic engagement)
- Violence against persons (sexual assault, domestic violence, intimate partner violence, gender-based violence, hate-motivated crime, child and elder abuse, justice system changes)
- Priority populations and diversity (children/youth, seniors/elderly, Indigenous peoples, new Canadians and immigrants, accessibility/disability)

Surveys were recently conducted for agencies and the community, and a number of focus sessions have been held, with more to come. The update work will continue into 2024. For more information, contact Jasmin Ralph, Clerk, at 1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 1502.

Upcoming Meetings: County Council, Wednesday, Dec. 6, 5 p.m.; Community Services, Dec. 6 (following County Council); Corporate Services, Dec. 6 (following Community Services). **County Council, Wednesday, Dec. 13, 5 p.m.;** Public Works, Dec. 13 (following County Council); Economic Development, Dec. 13 (following Public Works). Watch for details about public access to meetings on agendas and through online notifications. For more information, contact 1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 1502. Like "LanarkCounty1" on Facebook and follow "@LanarkCounty1" on X!