

Region Fast-Tracks Budget

Partial financial blueprint stacked with construction-ready projects

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Regional council fast-tracked approval for most of its 2009 capital budget Thursday to create jobs in the face a looming recession.

Council called a special meeting to vote on the \$116-million budget -- even though regional police haven't submitted a cash request yet.

Finance commissioner John Bergsma suggested councilors approve a partial budget immediately and consider an eventual police request later.

"We think the timing is really important in terms of providing an economic stimulus," he said.

A speedy budget allows the Region to go to tender earlier on road, water and sewage projects, and it may also result in lower costs, Bergsma said.

The budget is also stacked with "construction-ready" projects, meaning more than 80 per cent of the approved cash will be spent in 2009. "This is probably the highest percentage of spending (in one year) we've ever had," Bergsma said.

The \$116 million will be beefed up by nearly \$40 million carried over from the 2008 budget.

Past capital budgets have included big dollars but delayed spending.

For example, this year's \$153- million budget includes \$35 million for future police headquarters, which likely won't be built before 2010.

"Our directors are focused on getting (work) done now," public works commissioner Ken Brothers told councilors.

Almost half the newly announced \$20 million in Ontario infrastructure money, for example, will go into seven fast-tracked road construction projects spread through Lincoln, St. Catharines, Niagara Falls and Fort Erie.

The other half will be reserved for the East-West Arterial Corridor, a planned road link between the QEW and the southern extension of Highway 406.

Regional Chairman Peter Partington called the spend-heavy plan "a great budget for difficult times."

Bergsma said he's hoping for a total 2009 capital budget in the \$120-million range, including a police allocation.

That could be tricky because police planners have previously forecast an extra \$14.4 million in 2009 for long-term facilities.

Regional staff have suggested police defer that request until 2010, Bergsma said.

Fort Erie Mayor Doug Martin, also a police board member, said the NRP capital budget "hasn't been fully debated yet."

He expects the board to discuss its budget needs and the Region's suggestion next Thursday.

The police board also plans to appeal its capital budget allocations for 2006, 2007 and 2008 to the Ontario Civilian Commission on Police Services.

Niagara Falls Mayor Ted Salci asked whether the Region had contingency funds available if the commission "forces us to deal with that demand."

Bergsma said even if the Region is ordered to spend \$100 million on new police facilities, the 2009 budget shouldn't be affected.

"That money won't be spent in 2009 under any scenario I understand," he said.

The Region still has to debate and approve the 2009 operations budget, likely in the new year.