

Speaking Notes/Points
Mayor Richard Stewart

Event: 2015 Budget Opening Remarks

Date: Monday, March 2, 2015, 7:00 p.m.

Location: Council Chambers

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Good evening.

There is no responsibility more important for our Council than diligently managing the public purse, a responsibility each of us takes seriously.

The overall economic and financial climate remains steady this year, but we cannot take that for granted. This Council has embraced fiscal discipline – and will continue to do so.

We have achieved a great deal in recent years. The City has increased the reserve funds on hand to replace infrastructure, while reducing taxpayer-supported debt.

The past five years have seen smaller and smaller property tax increases, and this year's is smaller still.

This is the first budget for our two newest Councillors who joined us after November's election: Councillor Dennis Marsden and Councillor Teri Towner. Both have a long history of contributions to our city, and in just a short time they have already made strong contributions to Council.

As this is their first city budget from this side of the table, I'd like to welcome them one final time to Council.

Councillor Marsden brings 30 years of finance, banking, human resources and business operational experience to our council. His ability to ask the provocative question and work toward consensus will serve us well in the coming term.

Councillor Towner has a business degree from SFU, worked many years as a manager and analyst in Human Resources for large BC Utility, where she worked with budgets, forecasting, personnel planning, etc. She prides herself in always striving for efficiency and "value-added" improvements.

As a council we must work together to develop a big picture vision for our city, and both Dennis and Teri have demonstrated in their short tenure a willingness and ability to engage in these conversations.

Normally this Council passes its budget in December, which gives Coquitlam a strong advantage in being first out-of-the-gate in signing contracts for large capital projects. But while that schedule is good for taxpayers, it can create challenges in an election year.

Both Brent and I remember our first budget. The election was on Saturday, and two full-day budget meetings began 36 hours later, on Monday morning. The four newly-elected Councillors that year hadn't even picked up our election signs yet before we were voting on the 2006 budget.

That process isn't fair to incoming Council members, or to the public who elect us.

So this year, because of the November 2014 election, we still passed the Capital budgets last fall, to ensure the best contract prices. But we opted to delay the full deliberation on the operations side of the budget until February, to allow our two new Councillors to participate fully. And both of them did. We even added an extra full day to budget deliberations this year, and we used all of it.

And of course, I'd like to acknowledge the work of my other six colleagues on Council – Councillors Brent Asmundson, Craig Hodge, Terry O'Neill, Mae Reid, Chris Wilson and Bonita Zarrillo. Each of them brings different skills and experience to this table, and I thank them for that. Our individual perspectives make us stronger as a whole.

We are a Council that comes to the table with a wide variety of political views and perspectives. But we are steadfast in our belief that by working together and building consensus, we can achieve the best for the people of Coquitlam.

This Year's Tax Landscape

Preparing a municipal budget is a delicate balance.

On the one hand, we hear our residents and the business community when they say their finances are increasingly stretched as the cost of living in the Lower Mainland continues to rise.

But we also hear that same community saying that they depend on the services provided by their city – especially around priorities such as transportation, public safety and parks.

There is a high demand for new and improved services, as well as the continued cost to maintain the ones we all depend on every day.

Add to this balance the increasing demands and responsibilities of municipal governments, many of which are rising faster than the rate of inflation.

Some of these are brand new responsibilities; pieces that used to wholly belong to other levels of government are now resting squarely on our shoulders at the burden of local taxpayers.

And some of these are new interfaces – pieces that still rest with other levels of government but in which we are now involved.

We can't continue to do more with less but we can work to ensure that we manage what we do as diligently as possible, and that we continue to grow other means of revenue outside of the property tax base, including Development Cost Charges, investments, and reserves and grants.

As a result of all that effort, refinement, and deliberation, we've succeeded once again, for the sixth year in a row, in reducing the property tax increase. This year's property tax increase of 2.34% is the lowest since 2005 and a sixth year in a row of declining increases. The investments in this budget amount to an increase of about \$48 for the average property owner this year. When added with utility cost increases, it's a total increase of \$73 for the average household.

For a number of years, Coquitlam has been shifting the commercial property tax burden, in recognition of the fact that our commercial tax rates have historically been relatively high in comparison to other municipalities.

After this year's shift, the residential property tax rate will be 2.71% while the business rate will be 1.71%.

Through this small adjustment, we are helping to support business in our community, which also helps to keep Coquitlam competitive in attracting jobs so that our residents can live and work in the same community.

And the results are gratifying. In December 2014, BC Business magazine ranked Coquitlam number three out of 36 in their list of the Best Cities for Work in B.C.

Looking at economic factors such as labour participation, population growth and income growth, Coquitlam is third overall in the province. We want every Coquitlam business to thrive, and we will continue to improve conditions for business in our city.

Business Planning

So how did we arrive at today's budget?

It takes months of work by Council and staff, and goes back to a very solid business planning process.

The Business Plan is based on clearly-defined criteria including our strategic goals, Council priorities, public priorities and input, initiatives currently underway and budgeted, and externally-driven initiatives.

The result is a set list of priorities to be accomplished.

And at the same time, we are continuously reviewing our processes to remove projects and processes that are no longer required, which also frees up funds and resources.

Through organizational reviews, our Staff Committee on Business Improvement and Customer Service, as well as our Stop Doing List, we are constantly managing our resources and striving for efficiencies to meet the changing demands of our stakeholders.

And, our budget is also shaped by solid feedback from the public.

Some of that feedback is informal – through conversations, email and phone calls – while some comes from formal feedback – through participation in our Ipsos-Reid Citizen Satisfaction Survey, our recent online Citizen Budget process, and our annual Town Hall Meetings.

The resounding feedback is that:

- you enjoy a high quality of life,
- Coquitlam is consistently providing excellent service,
- and you want us to continue due diligence and look for ongoing efficiencies and improvements.

2015 Objectives

So, what should you, the taxpayer, expect to see in 2015?

The budget is large and complex, but I'd like to highlight a few initiatives that can be divided into six key areas:

1. Public Safety;
2. Planning for our growing community;
3. Burke Mountain;
4. Transportation and Infrastructure;
5. Parks, Recreation and Culture; and
6. Business

Public Safety

I'll begin with Public Safety - by far the largest area of spending in 2015, and 50% of new spending.

Additions this year include six new members to the Coquitlam RCMP.

These members will support a Coquitlam-specific team designed to enhance community safety by boosting patrol and police response resources in crime hotspots and during high call volume.

Coquitlam has achieved a low crime rate – we are consistently ranked as one of the top 10 safest communities in B.C.

But we want to maintain that good record – especially as our population grows.

Planning for our Growing Community

As one of the fastest-growing municipalities in B.C., we are planning for our growing community.

This includes formal planning processes such as the Burquitlam-Lougheed Neighbourhood Plan and the Northwest Burke Vision.

We are planning for the Evergreen Line and all that will come with it in 2016 – including new development, parking, public art, enhancing public spaces, and improving the corridors around the Skytrain Line such as Pinetree Way, North Road and Clarke Road.

And we'll also be planning to help ensure that as our community evolves, we are not forgetting about those who may be more vulnerable.

This includes the Housing Affordability Strategy, on which we'll be seeking public input this spring, as well as next steps for the Riverview Lands and the opening of our new homeless shelter.

This Council has remained steadfast that our vision for the Riverview site includes preservation of the lands, as well as a mental health component.

I have spoken at great length about this, as have all of Council.

While this is a deeply personal issue for our family, it is also the right thing to do for our community.

We've recently seen some mental health services re-established in Hillside and Brookside. And we remain committed to advancing our vision with the Provincial government as they continue their visioning process this year.

Burke Mountain

As we plan for our growing community, without a doubt, this will include a focus on Burke Mountain.

Approximately one quarter of residents new to Coquitlam in the next 30 years will be moving to this area.

So, in addition to the Northwest Burke Vision, which will outline the vision for future development, you will continue to see significant investments this year and in coming years.

This includes infrastructure such as the widening of Coast Meridian Road, and the extension of David Avenue.

This year we'll be presenting the plan for Partington Creek Village – the future retail and community hub for Burke Mountain.

And we continue to ensure that all the required municipal services are in place to serve this new community.

But we know there are still two big pieces missing for residents: schools and transit.

While these fall outside of the City's direct area of responsibility, we will continue to do what we can – and all that we can – to help move these two issues forward.

Transportation & Infrastructure

Consistently, one of the top priorities for residents is transportation.

We want to get you home to your families faster at the end of the day, in whatever mode of transport you choose.

We also want to ensure that we are properly maintaining our roadways to keep you safe, and ease the wear and tear on your vehicles.

More than \$84 million will be spent on transportation over the next five years through our Capital Expenditure Program.

This includes pieces I've already touched on such as the Evergreen Line corridors and Coast Meridian.

But it also includes \$32 million in important road rehabilitation.

Pedestrian safety is something that I – and the rest of Council – feel very strongly about.

And one of the best and most enduring ways that a City can ensure pedestrian safety is through improved Engineering.

As such, 2015 will see continued investment in the school walkability and bikeability programs, focusing on Middle Schools.

And, while not formally part of our budget discussions tonight, I'd be remiss if I didn't highlight the upcoming Transit Referendum.

Eligible voters will have a chance this spring to decide if they support a 0.5% increase to the Provincial Sales Tax in order to support \$250 million a year in necessary transit and transportation investments, including investments that Coquitlam desperately needs.

And I mention it tonight because I want to encourage Coquitlam residents to get informed on their decision and to consider how their vote may impact future transportation, congestion, and even future budgets, as a no vote would require additional municipal spending in expanding and upgrading our road network, building more parking, and other considerations.

Parks, Recreation & Culture

Moving on to Parks, Recreation and Culture, this is another area that will see substantial investment.

Many of you came out last year and provided us your input on the Parks, Recreation and Culture Master Plan – thank you for that.

This important document will guide our work going forward and will help ensure that we keep and grow the spaces that contribute to an improved quality of life for our residents.

\$500,000 will be provided to facility capital maintenance to take care of the facilities that exist in our community – because we have to take good care of what we already have in order to ensure that it lasts as long as we need it to.

And another \$500,000 will be included to support enhancements identified in the Master Planning Process – because we hear you when you say there are still things you'd like to see in your community.

This will include improvements, for example, to Rochester and Leigh Parks, new turf at Charles Best, a new Fieldhouse in Mundy Park and a spray pad upgrade at Blue Mountain Park.

We're also considering a new festival and performance site at Town Centre Park – and I thank everyone who provided their input on our recent consultation for this.

And in 2015 we'll be starting to plan for a new recreation facility in Burquitlam, in partnership with the YMCA of Greater Vancouver.

Using an innovative partnership model, as well as development funding from Community Amenity Contributions, we're moving forward with an expansive new recreation facility, benefitting both Burquitlam and the broader community. This project will be funded – both Capital funds and future operational funds – from outside of the property tax base.

I'd also like to highlight \$218,000 to the Coquitlam Public Library – a beloved local asset – to help them replace and upgrade outdated technology.

Today's library goes well beyond traditional paper book borrowing and we must ensure they have the tools necessary to provide the services required.

Business

And finally, for our business community.

We want to continue to be one of the best cities for work in B.C.

We want to help you create new jobs for our residents.

One initiative this year will be the creation of an Economic Development Advisory Committee.

We will also continue to invest in our Tourism program to bring people to Coquitlam – to shop in our stores, and eat in our restaurants and experience all that we have to offer.

And we remain committed to the annual tax shift to help make it more cost-effective for you to do business in Coquitlam.

Looking Ahead & Conclusion

Looking ahead, 2015 is going to be a busy year, a year of advances, but also a year of preparations. And it's all leading to 2016, which will be an exciting year of change.

In 2016, we'll be host to the B.C. 55+ Games, we'll celebrate our 125th Anniversary, and the Evergreen Line will open – all within the span of a few months.

Make no mistake, it's an exciting time to be in Coquitlam.

I said five years ago, in 2010, that this decade belongs to Coquitlam. We're approaching the halfway point of this decade, and there is an energy and an excitement in our community.

But within that, we are still a community where you know your neighbour – and you help your neighbour, as evidenced by the number of people who contacted us wanting to help the residents affected by the recent fire on Glen Drive.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge those in our community who showed how much Coquitlam cares, who stepped up when other residents were struggling. Thank you, all.

We have heard from you that you want us to be accountable. But we have also heard that you depend on us for services, infrastructure and amenities.

Tonight's budget strikes that delicate balance.

In fact, if we remove the two largest areas of spending – new police officers, and parks and facilities spending – this year's increase would be about 0.6% -- significantly less than the rate of inflation.

Even with those two key spending areas, we're presenting the lowest tax increase in six years.

To staff and my fellow members of Council who have thrown a lot of passion behind this year's budget, I thank you.

Collectively, we are working to ensure that Coquitlam remains a community of choice for residents, businesses and visitors.

Thank you.