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Item No. 11

Halifax Regional Council
May 27, 2008

TO: Mayor Kelly and Members of Halifax Regional Council

SUBMITTED BY:

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "G. L. Kaiser", written over a horizontal line.

Geris Kaiser, Deputy Chief Administrative Officer - Corporate Services
and Strategy

DATE: May 20, 2008

SUBJECT: Plebiscite re: Tax Reform Question

INFORMATION REPORT

ORIGIN

At the Committee of the Whole meeting of May 13, 2008, staff committed to providing an information report outlining costs and timelines for holding a Plebiscite relative to Tax Reform during the 2008 Municipal and School Board Election in October.

BACKGROUND

HRM is currently conducting tax reform public consultation sessions regarding the municipal tax system in HRM with the last session to be held on June 4, 2008.

The Municipal Elections Act, Section 56 (2) states “The returning officer shall grant a poll for the determination of any matter that the council has directed him to put before the electors.”

DISCUSSION

In order to accommodate a plebiscite during the Municipal and School Board Elections in October, staff would require two decisions of Council:

1. A decision on whether or not council wished to hold a plebiscite. This decision would be required by June 10, 2008.
2. A decision on the nature and wording of the question(s) should a plebiscite be directed. This decision would be required by June 24, 2008.

The most critical part of a plebiscite is the question being asked. The question being asked must be clear and concise. It should be accompanied by an explanation of what a "Yes", "No" or other answer means and what it does not mean. In short, the impact of that answer must be clear to a reasonably informed individual. Because the wording of the question is so critical, it may be advisable to make the decision on a plebiscite at the same time as deciding on the actual wording of the question.

In the case of tax reform, a question for the public could take one of three directions:

- (1) a broad theoretical question as to whether individuals prefer the tax system be based on services, ability to pay or on a combination of the two;
- (2) a specific question as to whether the draft tax model outlined in the report of the Tax Reform Committee is an acceptable alternative to the current assessment-based system;
- (3) a specific question as to whether a revised draft tax model (which may be put forward by the Committee following public consultations) is an acceptable alternative to the current assessment-based system.

Under each of these questions, a citizen would need to understand what action Council could be expected to take or avoid should a majority (or specified percentage) of taxpayers mark their ballots as such. Any approach leaves considerable room for explanation. If a broad question is asked, many individuals will naturally turn to the specific details that have been released through public consultations for guidance. A specific question on that report may be flawed as the Committee has released it as a draft for discussion and it is subject to change.

Another approach would be a combination of the two. Citizens would be asked a question such as:

When looking at the overall proposal of the Tax Reform Committee, my preference is to:

- A. Accept the committee's suggestions
- B. Modify the committee's suggestions
- C. Still Reform but move in another direction
- D. Do not change the tax system

Conversely, Council could ask whether citizens wish the tax system to be reformed or not. This would still have to be clarified as to what reform means and what it does not mean.

The Municipal Election Reserve was established to provide the resources and infrastructure to conduct Municipal and School Board Elections. The cost of the 2008 Municipal Election of approximately \$1.5M was approved in the 2008/09 Operating Budget. To implement a plebiscite ballot on tax reform, additional funding of approximately \$187,000 to cover costs of \$70,000 for election day (ballots, ballot box and increased worker payments), \$37,000 for a mail out to each household in HRM detailing the question to the electors and \$80,000 for six weeks of advertising would be required.

BUDGET IMPLICATIONS

Contingent funding was not identified in the 2008/09 operating or reserve budgets for any plebiscite ballots to be included in the 2008 Municipal Elections. Should staff be directed to include a plebiscite for Tax Reform in the upcoming elections, sufficient funding will need to be identified while maintaining a balanced operating budget.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT POLICIES / BUSINESS PLAN

This report complies with the Municipality's Multi-Year Financial Strategy, the approved Operating, Capital and Reserve budgets, policies and procedures regarding withdrawals from the utilization of Capital and Operating reserves, as well as any relevant legislation.

ATTACHMENTS

None

A copy of this report can be obtained online at <http://www.halifax.ca/council/agendasc/agenda.html> then choose the appropriate meeting date, or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 490-4210, or Fax 490-4208.

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