I realize you are in the final stages of a budgeting process that began last September. I suspect the timeliness of my remarks precludes they will have much impact on the final budget you approve. Rather I hope my comments will be considered as the 2014 budget is spent and when the 2015 budgeting process begins.

The tax-supported operating budget proposal before you, together with the three other budgets already approved, totals to $1.9 Billion annually or $5.2 Million per day. That’s about $3,550 annually for every person living in Hamilton. That’s a lot of money. That’s a lot of responsibility and accountability.

My intent is not to complain about what’s wrong with our city. But I do want to say I’m concerned about the sustainability of our city’s finances. I’m concerned because the City’s expenses – exclusive of the $126 Million downloaded by the province and the $145 Million Police Services spending - are growing faster than the inflation rate and population growth rates combined. As a result, I think we focus too much on growth as the solution to our financial challenges.

While growth can bring new employment opportunities, it must be balanced against the stresses it places on our environment and existing infrastructure, as well as the demands it makes for new infrastructure.

In my opinion, the current cost structure and infrastructure deficit of $2 Billion together are a real threat to our financial sustainability.

And I have no expectations of any help from the provincial and federal levels of government. Their financial sustainability is more fragile than ours.

As an individual citizen, I must share a feeling of some frustration. I have no direct mechanism to hold the City managers responsible and accountable. I depend on Council, acting as the City’s “Board of Directors”, to perform a governance role and evaluate the performance of the City managers. I look to you to hold the City managers accountable for their spending, the City’s cost structure and the state of our infrastructure. Further, I can only vote for two members of the City’s 16-member “Board of Directors” every four years.
I feel if one is going to speak of problems, one should also offer solutions. So I’d like to offer three.

First, the completion of the Service Delivery Review is essential information to any analysis of the cost structure. Why can’t productivity growth exceed population growth? What if we are being over-served? I acknowledge Council’s direction to staff to maintain current service levels. I’m not sure we can achieve that and address the infrastructure deficit.

Second, I urge you to improve your working relationship with the public school board. They are taking decisions about their assets – driven by their financial pressures – which are undermining our neighbourhoods and communities and placing unplanned demands on our infrastructure.

Third, I ask that you enable citizens to play a real role in monitoring City spending and developing budgets. There are many smart people in Hamilton with skills and expertise and good ideas who want to make a meaningful contribution to our City.

A famous Hamiltonian said: “we’re all in this together”. We choose to live here. We want to help ensure our City is sustainable.

Thank you.

Jim Sweetman
February 25, 2014