PUBLIC BUDGET CONSULTATION

For the past three budget years, Staff solicited public feedback through an online and paper survey on the budget. A summary of the results is as follows:

Based on an analysis of the survey responses, several recurring themes emerged, reflecting resident priorities and concerns. Comments are grouped by theme below:

1. Dissatisfaction with Tax Increases

- Overwhelming frustration with the scale and frequency of tax increases; many cite increases of 20-30% over the past few years while not seeing corresponding improvements in services.
- Several residents state taxes are becoming "unaffordable," especially for seniors, single-income families, and lower-income households.
- Many respondents request a freeze or reduction in property taxes and call for spending cuts instead of higher rates.
- Perceived lack of alignment between rising taxes and visible improvements: *"Taxes keep going up, services seem to be going down. Roads are terrible."*

2. Road and Infrastructure Maintenance

- Road condition is the single most cited issue by residents. Many describe local roads as "terrible", "embarrassing", or "unacceptable," with specific roads (Elmira, Barnswallow, Arthur Street, Conestogo) named repeatedly.
- Residents demand priority for fixing and maintaining roads over new projects or non-essential spending.
- Concerns about snow removal, pothole repair, outdated sewers, and bridge closures are repeated throughout.
- Many question where infrastructure levies have gone given ongoing deterioration.

3. User Fees: Support, Concerns, and Limitations

- Considerable support for "user pays" models—many agree that those who use services like swimming lessons, room rentals, and permits should contribute to those costs.
- Equally common are concerns about affordability and accessibility: residents worry increased fees could exclude low-income or marginalized groups from recreation and essential programs.
- Several recommend means-tested or sliding scale fees, especially for recreation (swimming lessons widely considered an essential, not a luxury).
- Some state that permits and developer fees are already too high, potentially harming affordability and growth.
- Several responses question the effectiveness of shifting fees to reduce taxes, suggesting it just "moves money around" with little real savings.

4. Staffing, Administration, and Efficiency

- Widespread concern that staffing and administration costs are excessive; many cite the “top-heavy” township office or “overblown” salaries and expansion of bureaucratic or non-frontline roles.
- Calls for wage freezes, hiring freezes, and tighter scrutiny on office expenditures over front-line services.
- Many express a desire for greater efficiency, accountability, and transparency in township spending.

5. Fairness and Equity Across Communities

- Consistent feeling of neglect in smaller communities (especially Breslau, Conestogo, Winterbourne) compared to Elmira and St. Jacobs, both in capital investment and ongoing services.
- Calls for better allocation of funds across all township areas, not just larger towns.

6. Desire for Transparency and Communication

- Residents frequently cite the need for clearer communication: requests for detailed budget breakdowns, clarity on how levies and user fees are spent, and more opportunities for public input.
- Skepticism about whether user fees are truly directed to offset taxes, or how collected funds are managed.

7. Approaches to Community Spending and Budget Priorities

- Many requested prioritization of “needs over wants": essentials like roads, utilities, health, and safety before spending on “extras” (some specifically mention climate initiatives, DEI roles, community events).
- Some support green initiatives and sustainability, but most favor partnerships, grants, and private/nonprofit involvement over tax-funded programs.

8. Calls for Economic Development and Amenities

- Several responses urge council to support economic development: attracting more and better businesses (especially dining, entertainment, shopping), particularly in under-served areas.
- Desire for more local amenities and recreational options (especially in Breslau and growing areas).