

■ **CITY COUNCIL:** Medical officer of health ordered to slash \$496,000 from the budget

Health unit pushed to make deeper cuts

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The London Free Press

City council is demanding the Middlesex-London Health Unit slash \$500,000 from its money request — or face unspecified consequences.

The health unit, ordered to cut \$496,000 by a council anxious for a tax freeze, had trimmed only \$100,000, prompting elected officials to demand more Thursday.

“There are options to the municipality” to force compliance, Mayor Joe Fontana warned medical officer of health Dr. Graham Pollett, after a council committee heard from city solicitor Jim Barber behind closed doors.

Coun. Nancy Branscombe echoed Fontana’s disappoint-

ment and likewise warned of repercussions. “There are remedies available to us,” she said.

In open session at the budget meeting, Barber said Guelph once defied a request for money from its health unit “and didn’t do that well.”

But he said there are provincial provisions for “assessors” to look into such requests.

“Your budgetary control with respect to some of these special purpose bodies is quite limited,” Barber cautioned.

But the committee was determined to press the issue.

The council committee was impressed London police had found \$1 million in additional savings and let the service off the hook for an additional \$500,000

originally sought.

“We thank them for their effort and they are on their way,” Branscombe said.

But upon learning the health unit has added 38 staff in recent years and received \$7.9 million in additional provincial money while city hall is imposing freezes and cutting back staff and programs, the politicians

balked at accepting Pollett’s proposed cut. The health unit is being asked to return to a budget session

Feb. 9 with the \$496,000 excised from its request. With the \$100,000 cut, the request to city hall is for a bit more than \$6 million this year.

Coun. Denise Brown, one of council’s appointees to the health unit, said Pollett’s effort “really disappointed me.”

“I think the Middlesex-London Health Unit should look at more reductions,” she said. She also noted London pays a greater proportion of the local health unit budget than other centres in Ontario.

But Steve Orser, the other councillor who sits on the health unit, was reluctant to play political hardball. “We legally can’t force this cut,” he said. “The province can force us to pay.”

Wage contract: London police getting 11% pay hike over four years. **Page A4**

For his part, Pollett said heightened health standards and the health unit’s written promise to be accountable for its work to the province are among the reasons cuts are difficult.

Asked by Branscombe if council’s proposed cut would mean his agency can’t meet its mandate, Pollett said that is correct.

“I don’t accept that,” Branscombe retorted. “We have to put everybody under the spotlight to ask everybody to meet the same targets we have asked our own departments to meet.”

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Joe Fontana

THE BOTTOM LINE

Amount of money cut from city budget Thursday: \$959,000

Projected tax increase: 1.44%

Property tax increase for the average London household: \$34

Final budget deliberations: Feb. 21

CUTS THURSDAY

■ \$1 million from London police.

■ \$600,000 in new initiatives from the community services budget.

■ \$496,000 ordered from the Middlesex-London Health Unit.

■ \$402,000 from London and Middlesex Housing Corp.

■ \$20,000 from \$50,000 request for mayor’s hospitality budget.

■ \$200,000 in capital grant allocations.