Understanding Burlington's Budget Increases 2023-2026

My *Property Taxes & Affordability* position explains what I believe Burlington needs to do over the next four years. It is also important to understand why City budgets increased significantly between 2023 and 2026.

The numbers tell a more complicated story than the headline tax increases alone.

The cost of existing services remained relatively close to inflation

The City of Burlington has separated the cost of maintaining existing services—what it calls the **Total Base**—from additional investments.

For the four budgets from 2023 through 2026:

- Compounded CPI benchmark: **15.56%**
- Burlington Total Base: **17.18%**

That 1.62 percentage-point difference is important context.

The City's overall budget increased considerably more because Council also funded infrastructure renewal and expanded a number of services.

2023 and 2024 were unusual years

Burlington entered 2023 still dealing with the financial consequences of COVID, unusually high inflation, revenue recovery challenges, labour-market pressures and increasing construction and infrastructure costs.

At the same time, some services had not kept pace with community requirements.

City staff described 2023 and 2024 as **"catch-up" budgets** and identified areas where additional investment was required.

Those investments included Fire, by-law enforcement, roads and parks, technology, community facilities and infrastructure renewal.

Where departmental spending increased

The City's approved budget increases were concentrated rather than spread evenly across every department.

Fire is one of the clearest examples. Its net operating budget increased from approximately **$32.6 million in 2022 to $42.0 million in 2026**.

By-law enforcement also expanded significantly from a much smaller base. The City had specifically identified by-law enforcement as an area where service levels were not meeting community expectations.

Roads, parks and forestry received additional resources as Burlington addressed maintenance requirements and an expanding inventory of public assets.

Digital technology increased particularly rapidly during 2023 and 2024 as the City modernized systems and absorbed increasing software and technology costs.

And substantial additional funding was directed toward **capital and infrastructure renewal**. This is money appearing in the operating budget that ultimately supports roads, buildings, parks and other long-lived City assets.

These are materially different from simply increasing administrative spending.

Transit requires a different conversation

Transit is one area where I believe Burlington should reconsider its approach.

The net Transit operating budget was approximately **$17.7 million in 2022 and $26.6 million by 2026**. Because the City changed its organizational and budget presentation during this period, the endpoints should not be interpreted as a perfectly like-for-like accounting series. Nevertheless, the direction of the increase is clear.

The City has deliberately expanded Transit. Investments have included additional buses and operators, more frequent service, free-fare initiatives and other service enhancements. In 2024 Burlington Transit recorded approximately **3.6 million trips**, and six routes were operating at frequencies of 15 minutes or better.

The policy question is whether continuing to expand the conventional fixed-route model provides the best value for the additional money being invested.

I believe the next step should be based on measurable results: ridership, utilization by route and time of day, cost per passenger trip, origins and destinations, and the amount taxpayers subsidize each trip.

Where large conventional buses are poorly utilized, Burlington should examine smaller, on-demand vehicles that can take people where they need to go when they need the service.

That is not an argument against public transit. It is an argument for redesigning transit around actual demand.

Infrastructure matters

Another major reason the overall budget grew faster than inflation was increased infrastructure investment.

Burlington maintains billions of dollars of roads, buildings, parks and other public assets. Council has maintained a dedicated annual Infrastructure Renewal Levy rather than allowing those assets to deteriorate and leaving future taxpayers with a larger problem.

This distinction matters when discussing operating-budget growth: money transferred from the operating budget to capital renewal is not the same thing as increasing the annual administrative cost of City Hall.

What I take from the last four years

The budget record shows three things happening simultaneously:

First, inflation and post-COVID conditions increased the cost of maintaining existing services.

Second, Burlington increased investment in selected services where additional capacity was being provided, including Fire, by-law, roads, parks, technology and Transit.

Third, Council increased funding for infrastructure and capital renewal.

Going forward, my focus is on measuring results.

Every major service should be able to demonstrate what residents are receiving for the additional money being invested. Where an investment is working, we should be able to show it. Where circumstances have changed—or a different delivery model can provide better service at lower cost—we should be prepared to change course.

That principle is central to my approach to **Property Taxes & Affordability: strategy, process, performance and measurable value for every tax dollar.**