Property Taxes, Affordability and the Next Four Years

Protect What Matters. Challenge What We Spend. Deliver Better Value.

Property taxes and affordability will be among the most important issues facing Burlington's next Council.

Burlington must remain affordable, and property-tax increases substantially above inflation cannot become the permanent norm.

Residents are entitled to ask where their money is going, why costs are increasing, what results they are receiving and what Council is doing to control future costs.

Those are legitimate questions.

My objective for the next four years is clear:

Progressively bring the operating-cost portion of Burlington's budget growth back toward inflation, while continuing the infrastructure investments necessary to protect the roads, parks, stormwater systems, buildings and other assets residents already own.

That distinction is important.

Burlington has a significant infrastructure-renewal funding gap built up over decades. The City's current Asset Management Plan identifies approximately **$1.22 billion of infrastructure-renewal requirements over the next 10 years**, compared with approximately **$868 million currently funded—a shortfall of about $350 million.**

For that reason, Burlington currently dedicates an additional **2% annual budget increase specifically to infrastructure renewal.**

I support continuing that levy.

It means that even if the operating cost of existing City services is brought close to inflation, Burlington's overall City budget increase will normally be higher because the dedicated 2% infrastructure levy must continue until the long-term infrastructure funding gap is adequately addressed.

Controlling taxes does not mean pretending our infrastructure obligations do not exist. It means controlling the costs we can control while responsibly funding the assets residents depend upon.

Understanding Burlington's Recent Tax Increases

The Burlington portion of the residential property-tax bill has increased substantially during the current Council term.

That should be acknowledged directly.

At the same time, Burlington's City portion represents approximately **52% of the total residential property-tax bill**. The remainder principally funds Halton Region—including police services—and education.

For 2026, Burlington's City budget increased **5.81%**, while the resulting combined residential property-tax increase was **4.50%**.

Both numbers are important.

Residents should be able to see clearly what the City increased, what Halton Region increased and what ultimately appeared on their total property-tax bill.

Some Costs Were Transferred, Not Created

Another factor needs to be understood when comparing Burlington's City budget with Halton Region's budget over this term.

Some costs were transferred from one level of municipal government to another rather than newly created.

The Province removed land-use planning responsibilities from Halton Region, with Burlington and the other local municipalities assuming responsibilities previously performed by the Region effective July 1, 2024.

Personnel and associated operating costs therefore moved from the Regional level to the local level.

Halton's budget requirement declined while Burlington assumed the cost of carrying out the transferred responsibilities.

From the homeowner's perspective, this was principally a **reallocation within the combined municipal property-tax bill**, rather than an entirely new municipal service.

This doesn't mean those costs should escape scrutiny.

It means we should distinguish between **new spending** and an existing responsibility transferred from one municipal level to another.

The Infrastructure Challenge Is Real

Burlington owns approximately **$7.1 billion in municipal infrastructure assets**.

Roads, bridges, community centres, parks, stormwater systems, vehicles, equipment and other assets deteriorate with time.

The City's current Asset Management Plan indicates that approximately **$1.22 billion should be invested in infrastructure renewal during the next 10 years** to prevent overall asset condition from deteriorating further.

Current planned funding is approximately **$868 million**.

That leaves an estimated **$350 million 10-year funding gap.**

This problem didn't develop overnight.

For many years Burlington, like many municipalities, invested less than ultimately required in infrastructure renewal.

Very low or zero tax increases can be attractive in the year they are approved.

But if they are achieved by postponing infrastructure investment, the liability doesn't disappear.

It moves into the future.

Roads deteriorate.

Stormwater systems need replacement.

Community facilities age.

Parks require renewal.

Vehicles and equipment eventually need replacing.

And deferred work usually becomes more expensive.

The 2% Infrastructure Renewal Levy Must Continue

This is why Burlington established a dedicated Infrastructure Renewal Levy.

The levy is currently equivalent to approximately **2% of the City's annual budget increase** and is specifically dedicated to addressing aging infrastructure.

The City's 2026 budget framework explicitly separated approximately **2% for inflation and another 2% for infrastructure renewal**, before other pressures were considered.

I believe residents should understand this clearly.

My objective of bringing operating-cost growth toward inflation **does not mean Burlington's total City budget increase will simply equal inflation.**

For the foreseeable future, the calculation will more realistically begin with:

**Inflationary pressure on existing services

- approximately 2% dedicated infrastructure renewal

- any separately justified new pressures or investments
  − productivity improvements, efficiencies and savings.**

That is a much more transparent way to discuss municipal affordability.

The 2% infrastructure levy should continue because failing to make those investments would simply recreate the infrastructure deficit for another generation.

The challenge is therefore to control the **rest of the budget much more aggressively.**

Where Did the Money Go?

In 2026 alone, Burlington approved approximately **$106.1 million in capital investment**, including:

$48.9 million for aging roads

$12.2 million for parks

$12.2 million for City facilities

and approximately **$7.9 million for stormwater infrastructure.**

These aren’t abstract expenditures.

They are investments in assets residents use every day.

I support maintaining that commitment.

But infrastructure is not the entire explanation for rising taxes.

Operating costs must also face much greater scrutiny.

Challenge Operating Costs Much More Aggressively

Council needs to continually challenge:

staffing growth,

compensation costs,

consulting expenditures,

administrative processes,

technology costs,

procurement,

program duplication,

and discretionary spending.

The starting point should be:

Can the existing service be delivered better without increasing its real cost?

And when additional spending is proposed:

What problem are we solving?

What measurable result will taxpayers receive?

Could the service be delivered differently?

Can technology eliminate work rather than simply automate it?

Is there something else we can stop doing?

Good government isn't measured by how much money it spends.

It is measured by the results residents receive.

How Does Burlington Compare?

Tax increases matter.

But so does the actual amount residents pay.

The 2025 BMA Municipal Study provides a standardized comparison of property taxes on comparable residential properties.

For a detached bungalow, it reported approximately:

Municipality	Annual Property Tax
Burlington	**$5,247**
Hamilton	$5,505
Oakville	$5,681
GTHA Average	$5,398

Burlington was therefore below both Hamilton and Oakville and below the GTHA average on this standardized comparable-home measure.

That isn't an excuse for future increases.

The question shouldn't be:

"Does somebody else pay more?"

It should be:

"Are Burlington residents receiving excellent value for what they pay—and how do we deliver that value with substantially lower operating-cost growth?"

Public Safety Requires Investment — And Results

Some property-tax pressure reflects deliberate investments residents expect us to make.

Public safety is an important example.

Halton Regional Council significantly increased funding for Halton Regional Police during 2025 and 2026.

I supported those investments because keeping our community safe is a fundamental responsibility of government.

But additional spending must produce measurable results.

We should continually ask:

Are auto thefts declining?

Are break-ins declining?

Are clearance rates improving?

Are response times improving?

Are officers visible where residents need them?

Are residents safer—and do they feel safer?

When taxpayers invest substantially more money, government should demonstrate what changed as a result.

That standard should apply throughout municipal government.

My 2027–2030 Affordability Commitments

1. Bring Existing Operating-Cost Growth Toward Inflation

The cost of delivering Burlington's existing services should generally grow at approximately the rate of inflation.

Anything materially above that should be separately identified and justified.

This does **not** mean promising that Burlington's entire budget increase will equal inflation.

That would ignore infrastructure renewal and other legitimate obligations.

My commitment is more precise:

Bring the existing operating-cost portion of the budget toward inflation while separately identifying and justifying everything added on top of it.

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2. Continue the 2% Infrastructure Renewal Levy

I support continuing Burlington's approximately **2% annual Infrastructure Renewal Levy** until the long-term infrastructure funding gap has been adequately addressed.

Infrastructure renewal should not become the first thing cut simply to produce a lower tax number.

That would be financially irresponsible.

The levy must, however, remain dedicated to its stated purpose.

Residents should be able to see:

what the levy raised,

which infrastructure projects it funded, whether the projects were delivered,

how Burlington's infrastructure condition changed,

and whether the long-term funding gap is declining.

If taxpayers are being asked for an additional 2% every year, they should be able to see exactly what it accomplished.

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3. Require Annual Productivity and Efficiency Improvements

Infrastructure needs additional funding.

That makes productivity elsewhere even more important.

Before taxpayers are asked for more operating money, every City department should demonstrate what it has done to become more efficient.

That includes:

process redesign,

automation,

appropriate use of artificial intelligence,

better procurement,

consolidating activities,

reducing unnecessary administration,

and eliminating work that no longer creates sufficient value.

Savings and productivity improvements should be identified publicly.

The objective isn't indiscriminate cutting.

It is redesigning services so they work better and cost less.

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4. Apply a Much Higher Test to New Spending

New permanent positions, consultants, programs and discretionary initiatives should require a strong business case.

Council should ask:

What problem are we solving?

What will it cost initially?

What will it cost every year thereafter?

What measurable result will residents receive?

Can we achieve the same outcome another way?

What could we stop or change to help pay for it?

Every new permanent expenditure eventually becomes part of the tax base.

That means today's decision becomes tomorrow's inflationary pressure.

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5. Strengthen Burlington's Rolling Five-Year Financial Outlook

About seven years ago, I introduced Burlington's **rolling five-year financial outlook** because Council should not make decisions one budget year at a time.

The outlook should be used increasingly to expose the long-term financial consequences of decisions before they become difficult to reverse.

It should clearly identify:

existing operating pressures,

employee costs,

the continuing 2% infrastructure requirement,

new services,

policing,

debt,

major capital commitments,

and the future operating costs created by new infrastructure.

A decision that looks affordable in year one can become very expensive by year five.

Council and residents should see that before the commitment is made.

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6. Transform Burlington Transit

Transit provides one of Burlington's largest opportunities for service redesign.

Burlington Transit currently carries approximately 10,000 passenger trips each day while requiring a substantial taxpayer subsidy.

Too often, large buses operate with **massive and costly underutilization**.

Technology now provides an opportunity to build a different model around smaller, electric, on-demand vehicles dynamically matched to passengers and destinations—while continuing to use large buses on routes and at times when demand warrants them.

Instead of asking residents to organize their lives around the bus:

Organize transit around the passenger.

Our working objective should be ambitious:

Could a fundamentally more convenient system attract approximately another 10,000 passenger trips every day?

Greater ridership does not automatically eliminate the transit deficit.

But dramatically improving vehicle utilization and matching capacity to demand could substantially change the economics of the service.

My long-term objective is to reduce the taxpayer subsidy per passenger and work toward eliminating—or coming as close as reasonably possible to eliminating—the approximately **$26.6 million annual transit funding deficit.**

Measure the results.

If the model works, expand it.

If it doesn't, change it.

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7. Make Growth Pay Its Way — And Time Infrastructure to Actual Growth

Burlington has substantial potential development capacity.

But approvals are not construction.

And a development pipeline is not a construction schedule.

The condominium market that was expected to deliver much of Burlington's future development has changed dramatically.

We must continue planning responsibly for future growth.

But we should not ask today's taxpayers to finance **growth-related** infrastructure years before the associated development actually occurs.

That is different from infrastructure renewal.

The distinction is important:

Renewal replaces and maintains infrastructure Burlington residents already own.

Growth infrastructure expands capacity primarily because additional development requires it.

The first needs continued investment now.

The second should be timed as closely as possible to demonstrated growth and paid for, to the greatest extent possible, by that growth.

Plan ahead. Follow the evidence. Build when needed. Make growth pay its way.

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8. Demand Results From Major Investments

Whether Burlington spends more on police, infrastructure, transit, technology or any other major service, the principle should be the same:

What result did taxpayers receive?

Government needs to move beyond measuring activity.

We should increasingly measure outcomes.

Did road condition improve?

Did flooding risk decline?

Did crime fall?

Did transit ridership rise?

Did cost per passenger decline?

Did response times improve?

Did a digital process reduce staffing requirements?

Did residents receive faster service?

Spending is an input. Results are the objective.

Plan for the Next 25 Years — Not Just the Next Budget

Property-tax affordability cannot be managed one year at a time.

Burlington's infrastructure challenge itself demonstrates why.

The assets we repair today may serve residents for another 30, 40 or 50 years.

Conversely, infrastructure we fail to maintain today becomes a liability for future taxpayers.

That is why Burlington's **25-year strategic perspective**, **Asset Management Plan** and **rolling five-year financial outlook** need to work together.

Long-term planning also requires us to distinguish between unavoidable commitments and costs we can change.

Infrastructure renewal is a long-term obligation.

Inflation is a real cost pressure.

But inefficient processes, outdated service-delivery models and unnecessary spending are not inevitable.

Those are where Council must become much more demanding.

The Choice Ahead

The objective for the next four years isn't simply to produce the lowest possible tax increase in one particular year.

It is to establish a **sustainable long-term financial model** for Burlington.

That means acknowledging something important:

With approximately **2% continuing to be dedicated annually to infrastructure renewal**, Burlington's total City budget increase will not necessarily be limited to inflation.

But that makes controlling the rest of the budget even more important.

The next Council should therefore:

Protect infrastructure renewal.

Drive existing operating-cost growth toward inflation.

Challenge new spending.

Require productivity improvements.

Redesign expensive services where better models exist.

Make growth pay its way.

Use the five-year financial outlook to expose future costs.

Measure results.

And be completely transparent with residents about what is driving their tax bill.

Affordability doesn't mean avoiding necessary investment.

It means knowing the difference between **what we must fund and what we can change.**

Protect what matters. Fund the infrastructure we need. Challenge what we spend. Redesign how we deliver. Measure the results. And provide better value for every tax dollar.

Paul Sharman
Ward 5 City & Regional Councillor