It’s Time to Put the Facts Behind the Numbers

Burlington’s budgets and property taxes increased significantly between 2023 and 2026.

Residents are right to ask why.

As Burlington’s Deputy Mayor for Budget, I believe those questions deserve a detailed, factual answer—not simply another argument about whether the percentage was too high.

I didn’t like the size of the increases either.

But understanding what happened requires looking behind the headline percentage.

Why did costs increase?

Where did the additional money go?

What services and infrastructure did those expenditures support?

What revenues helped offset those costs?

And what could Burlington do differently in the future?

I went back through four years of Burlington budgets to answer those questions.

A Budget Isn’t One Decision Made on Budget Day

A municipal budget is the financial consequence of hundreds of decisions made throughout the year.

Council makes decisions about Fire protection, Transit, by-law enforcement, roads, parks, forestry, recreation, community facilities and infrastructure.

Staff develops a proposed budget reflecting those decisions together with service requirements, compensation, contractual obligations, inflation, revenues and financial forecasts.

Then Council examines it.

Every member of Council participates in the budget process and has the opportunity to question expenditures and propose amendments to increase, reduce, defer or remove spending.

Budget	Council Amendment Process
2023	Council amendments were incorporated into the approved budget using a different process
2024	**62 amendments proposed; 27 approved**
2025	**27 amendments proposed; 4 approved**
2026	**22 amendments proposed**; **8 Council amendments approved**

The 2023 budget used the City’s earlier budget process and is therefore not directly comparable with the proposed-versus-approved amendment counts used in subsequent years.

The important point is that **every councillor had the opportunity to make the budget different.**

A councillor can ultimately vote against the complete budget. That is part of the public record.

But a final “no” vote does not tell residents what alternative budget that councillor would have adopted.

That leads to a much more useful question:

What specifically should have been different?

What Actually Drove the Increases?

The City’s own budget analysis provides important context.

City Budget Component	2023	2024	2025	2026	Four-Year Compounded
Inflation benchmark	6.80%	3.90%	2.40 %	1.70 %	**15.56%**
Maintaining existing services	6.76%	3.77%	2.82 %	2.88 %	**17.18%**
Infrastructure renewal	1.60%	2.00%	2.00 %	2.00 %	**7.74%**
Service enhancements	5.37%	4.45%	2.72 %	0.94 %	**14.12%**
Total City budget increase	**13.73 %**	**10.20 %**	**7.51 %**	**5.80 %**	**42.56%**

The numbers show that there was no single cause.

A substantial part of the increase reflected **inflation and the increasing cost of maintaining existing services.**

Council also deliberately invested more in **Fire protection, Transit, by-law enforcement, roads, parks, forestry, recreation, community facilities and infrastructure renewal.**

Those were choices.

They should be examined individually rather than treating the total budget increase as though it resulted from one cause.

Employee Compensation — What Happened?

Employee compensation increased significantly in dollars.

But the important question is whether compensation consumed an increasingly large share of the operating budget.

Year	Employee Compensation	Gross Operating Budget	Compensation Share
2022	$138.1M	$284.7M	**48.5%**
2023	$156.3M	$313.9M	**49.8%**
2024	$169.7M	$346.2M	**49.0%**
2025	$180.7M	$366.3M	**49.3%**
2026	$192.2M	$386.0M	**49.8%**

Employee compensation therefore remained at approximately **half of gross operating expenditures**.

And much of the additional staffing supports the municipal services residents see and use.

Other Revenues Reduce the Tax Requirement

Gross expenditures are not funded entirely through property taxes.

The City also receives user fees, licence and permit revenues, grants, recoveries and other revenues.

In 2020, approximately **$92.6 million** in non-property-tax revenues helped support gross expenditures of approximately $267.0 million.

By 2026, those revenues had increased to approximately **$105.2 million**, while gross expenditures had grown to approximately **$386.0 million**.

Revenues therefore helped—but they did not grow nearly as quickly as expenditures.

The remaining requirement has to be financed principally through property taxes.

The Direction Has Changed

The tax impact of new service enhancements declined:

2023 — 5.37%
2024 — 4.45%
2025 — 2.72%
2026 — 0.94%

The annual City budget increase also declined:

2023 — 13.73%
2024 — 10.20%
2025 — 7.51%

2026 — 5.80%

That trend matters.

It does not erase the increases residents experienced, but it provides important context for where Burlington's spending trajectory is heading.

What Would We Have Done Differently?

Explaining these budgets does not mean that every decision was perfect.

Quite the opposite.

Understanding what caused the increases allows us to ask much better questions.

Should we have hired fewer firefighters?

Invested less in infrastructure renewal?

Provided less by-law enforcement?

Expanded Transit differently?

Delayed community facilities?

Reduced investment in roads, parks or forestry?

Or could some of these services have been delivered differently and more efficiently?

I believe the last question is particularly important.

Transit is one example. Rather than assuming that continuing to expand conventional fixed-route service is always the answer, I believe Burlington should examine actual ridership, utilization, cost per passenger and whether smaller, technology-enabled, on-demand vehicles can provide better service at lower overall cost.

The Next Four Years

Property-tax affordability must remain a priority.

But addressing affordability requires more than looking backward at a percentage.

Every future budget should answer four questions:

1. What does it cost to maintain the services we already have?

2. Where is additional investment genuinely necessary?

3. What revenues can reasonably offset those costs?

4. Where can technology, productivity and different service-delivery models produce better results at lower cost?

That is where I believe Burlington’s budget discussion should go next.

Understand the numbers. Measure the results. Challenge how we deliver services. Make decisions based on the facts.

Read the Full Analysis

For residents who want to examine the numbers in greater detail, I have also prepared a comprehensive review of Burlington's 2023–2026 operating budgets, including compensation, revenues, infrastructure investment and individual service areas.

[READ THE FULL FOUR-YEAR BUDGET ANALYSIS]