



Taking a tally

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JORDAN VERLAGE/OWW

FESTIVE DANCERS – The Serbian Folk Dance Group 'Frula' perform at the St. Simeon Serbian Orthodox Church on May 16 during Serbian Fest at its new DeWinton location.

Okotoks Town councillors' expenses go public

By Roxanne Blackwell
Staff Reporter

Okotoks councillors are making it easier for residents to see how much they are spending on the job.

Council approved changes to the Town's elected official expenses policy last week, which will see councillors fill out quarterly expense sheets detailing every penny spent on meals, travel and accommodations. The information will then be posted on the Town's website for public viewing.

Coun. Tanya Thorn originally brought forward the idea in November 2014, and Town administration has been busy since then re-writing the expenses policy to include the expense sheets. Thorn said she was happy

to see the final revisions and hopes it will eliminate any skepticism the public has about politicians and finances.

"There's been so many, more on the provincial and federal levels than municipal, but scandals around expenses and spending and all of those things and I don't believe as politicians we have anything to hide," she said. "If you're doing your job you should have no problem putting out what your expense claims are and be able to defend why you claimed a \$75 meal or whatever it might be.

"So, making it publicly accessible and being able to have questions asked on it, it eliminates that cloud of doubt."

Councillors are currently paid around \$38,000, with the Mayor making \$75,000, one third of

which is tax free. Councillors are allowed to submit expenses for travel, meals, hosting, loss of income, and childcare to the town for reimbursement.

Rather than just looking for financial mismanagement, Thorn said the public can also consider the forms as a type of report card that showcases what councillors are doing to improve their skills.

The new policy outlines a \$2,500 annual budget for each councillor to fund "professional training and development."

"I'm a big believer in the workforce in general that we should always be improving our knowledge and educating ourselves on what's new and new advances and I think that still is important for councillors it still is a job," she said. "So, I think it highlights who is

making an effort to do additional training on community issues or whatever the case may be and being able to showcase that."

Despite the changes that were made, one councillor felt they didn't go far enough.

Coun. Carrie Fischer requested that council vote to eliminate a section allowing councillors to be reimbursed for childcare expenses as well for loss of wages from primary employers.

"I think it's excessive expense claiming on behalf of council to claim childcare. Most parents that we represent have to pay for childcare and for us to express that they pay for their child care and then ours I think is wrong," she said. "This is a paid position to the tune of \$38,000 which is a fairly decent wage for a part time position, and

the combined I think it compensates all councillors fairly on the attendance to all meetings which is part of the commitment they signed up for."

Coun. Ed Sands explained that the purpose of the childcare reimbursements was to create a level playing field for all councillors to encourage a diverse range of people to run.

"The suggestion was to cover childcare for women in municipal government," he said. "If a significant amount of their salary is eaten up with childcare, that doesn't put them in line with other members who may be older and retired."

Ultimately, council voted to keep the reimbursement section in the policy, with Coun. Fischer casting the lone vote against it.

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JORDAN VERLAGE/OWW

A Slovak folk music group tunes up their instruments before performing at Serbian Fest at the St. Simeon Serbian Orthodox Church near Heritage Pointe on May 16.



JORDAN VERLAGE/OWW

A new ornate chandelier adorns the St. Simeon Serbian Orthodox Church near DeWinton.



JORDAN VERLAGE/OWW

Men cook casing-less sausages called Cevapcici for patrons at Serbian Fest on May 16.



JORDAN VERLAGE/OWW

Serbian dancers 'Frula' perform for an audience during Serbian Fest at the St. Simeon Serbian Orthodox Church on May 16.

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