

Tamara Sargent's Responses to the COST Candidate Questionnaire

1. Owen Sound's population has stagnated for more than two decades, while the size and cost of the municipal management structure have increased significantly. What changes would you make to ensure that the City's senior management structure is lean, accountable and focused on results rather than simply administering the status quo?

Would you support recruiting a City Manager with a demonstrated record of organizational transformation, cost reduction and successful change management?

Would you also support establishing fixed-term, renewable contracts for senior management positions, with a significant portion of compensation tied to measurable performance objectives established by Council?

I support a lean and accountable municipal administration, but I do not believe cost reduction should come at the expense of workers' rights or public services. My priority would be reorganizing and reallocating existing human resources before cutting jobs or adding new positions.

Council must also be willing to push back when additional hiring is not clearly justified. At the November 9, 2023 Corporate Services Committee meeting, for example, committee members considered postponing work rather than immediately hiring additional staff, while senior administration strongly advocated for proceeding. Council should independently determine whether new positions are truly necessary.

I support clear performance expectations and strong accountability for senior management, but I am cautious about importing private-sector practices such as performance-based compensation into municipal government.

Municipal government is not a business, and its success should not be measured by how few workers it employs or how little money it spends. Its purpose is to pool our collective resources to provide the public services and infrastructure that people need.

If Owen Sound were recruiting a new City Manager, I would therefore support looking for someone with a demonstrated ability to transform organizations, improve efficiency and successfully manage change - but also someone who understands that the purpose of those changes is to deliver better public services and better value to the people of Owen Sound, not simply to cut costs.

2. Owen Sound taxpayers have experienced property-tax increases that, in our view, have exceeded what can reasonably be justified by inflation and population growth.

Would you support a policy limiting annual property-tax increases to the rate of inflation unless the City Manager can demonstrate a compelling reason to exceed it?

If you would support exceeding inflation, what circumstances would justify doing so?

Affordability is central to my campaign. My goal is not simply to keep taxes down - it is to ensure the cost of our public services is distributed according to ability to pay, rather than continually shifting more of the burden onto working people.

This is why I have proposed a Vacant Residential Property Tax, so that homes deliberately left vacant contribute more while creating an incentive to put those homes back into use.

I would treat inflation as an important benchmark and expect a clear public justification whenever Council proposes an increase above it. However, I would not support an absolute cap that could prevent necessary investments in infrastructure or public services.

I believe we also need to talk about who pays municipal taxes, not simply how much we collect. The problem isn't necessarily how much the City needs to provide the services people rely on; the question is how we distribute that cost fairly.

When Owen Sound became part of Grey County in 2001, the City advocated to retain control over its tax ratios. We succeeded, and Ontario Regulation 311/01 was passed, giving Owen Sound the exceptional ability to continue setting its own tax ratios independently of Grey County. However, that independence came with an expectation that Owen Sound would gradually move its tax ratios toward those of Grey County, without establishing a deadline for when that convergence had to be completed.

More than two decades later, I believe it is time for Owen Sound to challenge that expectation. Rather than continuing to migrate our tax ratios toward the County's, Council should advocate to the Province for the right to design a tax system that reflects the needs of our own community.

That authority gives Council a choice: ask wealthy business property owners to pay a fairer share, or continue placing a disproportionate burden on working class Owen Sound homeowners.

Instead, this past Council has moved in the opposite direction. When it took office, the multi-residential tax ratio was 1.6779. Council progressively reduced it to 1.0 in 2026. That doesn't reduce the amount of money the City needs to collect - it just reduces the amount that large landlords pay, while shifting more of the levy onto residential homeowners.

In other words, Council shifted the tax burden away from large multi-residential property owners and onto working class homeowners.

I disagree with this direction. I want Council to advocate for greater control over municipal taxation and use that authority to distribute the burden more fairly.

If the City continues down this path by migrating its commercial tax ratio from its current 1.71 toward 1.0, next commercial properties will pay a smaller share of the levy - and homeowners will again be forced to make up more of the difference.

We can make municipal taxes more affordable for working people without sacrificing the public services they rely on. The answer isn't simply lower taxes - it's fairer taxes.

3. *Owen Sound's population today is smaller than it was in 2011, yet municipal spending and staffing have continued to grow.*

Would you support requiring every municipal department to identify 5-10% in potential savings, including staff cuts, as part of the budget process?

Would you support using the City's 2011 budget, adjusted for inflation, as a benchmark for determining whether today's spending levels are justified?

If not, what alternative approach would you use to identify and eliminate unnecessary spending?

I would not require every department to cut 5-10%, particularly through staff reductions. Municipal workers are not simply an expense on a spreadsheet - they are the people who maintain our infrastructure, operate our facilities and deliver the public services residents depend upon.

I support eliminating genuine waste, but cutting workers or reducing public services simply to achieve an arbitrary savings target is not responsible budgeting for our community. When public services are cut, the cost often does not disappear - it is shifted onto working class people, who are the least able to afford to replace those services privately.

The Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force calculates that a worker in our region needs to earn \$24.60 an hour just to make ends meet. So for example, cutting transit may save the City money on paper, but it shifts the cost onto a full-time, minimum-wage worker who relies on the bus to get to work because they cannot afford a car.

A municipal budget can show a 'saving' while leaving the community poorer overall. I don't consider it an efficiency when government saves a dollar by forcing a working person to spend two.

I would also not use the 2011 budget, adjusted for inflation, as a spending ceiling. Owen Sound's needs, responsibilities and costs have changed over fifteen years.

My approach is to protect workers and public services while demanding that every dollar of public money serves a genuine public purpose. The objective should be an efficient government that delivers good public services - not simply the smallest government possible.

4. *Many residents believe there is an increasing disconnect between City Hall and the taxpayers it serves.*

What would you do to make City Council more transparent, accessible and accountable to residents?

Would you support greater public disclosure of the rationale behind major spending decisions, staffing increases, consultant contracts and significant policy decisions?

More importantly, what would you do to ensure that residents are treated as stakeholders in municipal government rather than as an obstacle to it?

I will always defend residents' right to participate meaningfully in our democratic process. If elected, one of the first motions I intend to table will be to repeal the recent Procedural By-law changes that restrict public participation at Council.

In 2021, others and I advocated against the proposed changes that would have reduced Public Question Period from five minutes to two and restricted residents to questions about matters already on the agenda. I celebrated when those restrictions did not make it into the final by-law.

Unfortunately, similar restrictions returned during this term of Council. In 2024, I once again appeared before Council to oppose them. Even after the Corporate Services Committee rejected the most contentious portions of the proposed changes, they were brought back before Council and ultimately approved.

I believe Council should be making it easier for residents to participate in local government - not harder.

Public participation should happen before decisions are made, not after. I learned about what is happening at Garafraxa Park while door knocking, after a resident asked me to investigate a broken swing they had previously reported to City Hall but had received no response about. In looking into their concern, I discovered that the playground is scheduled to be removed before the end of 2026. I was the one who ended up informing the resident.

I confirmed with City staff that neighbourhood residents had not been consulted about the future of their playground. That's exactly the kind of issue where residents should be treated as stakeholders from the beginning, not find out by accident after a decision has already been made.

Residents are not an obstacle to municipal government. They are the reason municipal government exists, and their right to question their elected representatives should be protected - not restricted.

5. Owen Sound's downtown is facing increasingly visible homelessness, addiction and public disorder.

What specific actions would you take to address these problems?

Would you support a coordinated approach with the County that combines:

- ***increased access to addiction treatment and mental-health services;***
- ***meaningful pathways into appropriate housing;***
- ***stronger enforcement of existing laws and bylaws when public safety is affected;***
and
- ***clear expectations for individuals receiving publicly funded support?***

What would you do differently from the current approach, and how would you measure whether your strategy is working?

I believe we need to distinguish between homelessness itself and genuine public safety concerns. Being poor, unhoused, experiencing mental illness or living with an addiction is not a crime, and our response should focus on helping people find stability and support rather than criminalizing them for having nowhere else to go.

Housing, homelessness and many social services are primarily the responsibility of Grey County and other levels of government. But Owen Sound can help prevent housing insecurity by reducing everyday costs. My platform includes better public transit, expanded library access and two free garbage bags per household, while a Vacant Residential Property Tax would encourage vacant homes back into use.

I also support harm reduction and much better access to mental-health and addiction treatment, so people can get help when they need it.

Everyone is accountable for their behaviour, regardless of their circumstances. If someone commits a crime, threatens another person or puts public safety at risk, our laws apply and should be enforced. But homelessness itself is not a crime. We can insist on safety and accountability without abandoning compassion, dignity or our responsibility to one another.

Success should mean fewer people experiencing homelessness, more people remaining securely housed, fewer overdose deaths and better access to treatment. A successful downtown strategy should make people in our community safer - not simply make poverty less visible.

6. Owen Sound needs more residential and commercial development if it is going to reverse decades of population stagnation.

Would you support reviewing the City's development-charge structure with the objective of making Owen Sound more attractive to developers and encouraging new housing construction?

Would you support targeted incentives or a temporary reduction or moratorium on development charges where appropriate, particularly where developers commit to including affordable or geared-to-income housing?

More broadly, what specific steps would you take to make Owen Sound a more attractive place to invest, build businesses and raise a family?

I support reviewing development charges, but in general, I do not support asking working-class taxpayers to subsidize wealthy private real estate developers and investors.

Development creates infrastructure costs. If we waive the charges intended to help pay those costs, the money has to come from somewhere - and too often that means shifting the bill from developers onto existing residents.

I would support targeted incentives when developers make enforceable commitments to permanently affordable, geared-to-income, nonprofit or cooperative housing.

Economic development should also be about making Owen Sound a place where working people can afford to live. Better public transit, expanded library access and eliminating garbage bag-tag costs make our community more affordable and improve quality of life.

I want development and investment in Owen Sound - but public money should improve the lives of the people who live here, not simply make the rich richer.

7. We believe taxpayers should be able to see the full cost of every municipal service, including the costs of administration, HR, payroll, facilities, information technology and other shared services.

Would you support fully allocating these costs to each municipal department, agency or shared-service arrangement so Council and taxpayers can see the true cost of each service?

Would you also support using this information when negotiating cost-sharing arrangements with organizations such as the Library and other agencies?

Yes. I support completing and formalizing Owen Sound's move toward full cost allocation so taxpayers and Council can see the full cost of delivering each service - not just its direct

operating budget. Other Ontario municipalities, like Guelph, already use full cost accounting models that allocate corporate support costs to the services they support, providing better information to identify potential efficiencies and redundancies. I would also use this information when negotiating cost-sharing agreements with other organizations.

Full cost accounting should help Council make better decisions, but it should not become an exercise in identifying services to cut. Cost tells us what a service consumes; it does not, by itself, tell us what that service is worth to the community.

8. *Water and wastewater charges have increased significantly, yet these costs are sometimes treated separately from the City's broader budget decisions.*

Would you support requiring the Water Department to present Council with a complete explanation and justification for proposed rate increases as part of the annual budget process?

Would you also support requiring the Water Department to participate in the same cost-reduction and efficiency reviews expected of other municipal departments?

Ultimately, do you believe Council - not municipal staff - should be fully accountable to taxpayers for increases in water and wastewater charges?

Yes. Water and wastewater are essential public services, and any proposed rate increase should clearly explain what is driving it, why it is necessary and what alternatives have been considered.

I support finding genuine efficiencies, but not through compromising service or postponing necessary infrastructure maintenance.

I am also concerned about Ontario's new Water and Wastewater Public Corporations Act, which allows municipal water and wastewater systems to be transferred to separate corporations. I oppose any move that distances an essential public service from public ownership, public accountability or democratic control. Owen Sound's water belongs in public hands and should be operated in the public interest - not for private profit.

Ultimately, Council is accountable. Staff provide professional advice, but Council approves budgets and rates. If I vote to increase someone's water bill, I owe that resident a clear explanation of why I believed it was necessary.

9. *Supplementary question - The Amazon Box Prosecution*

I agree that this case raises serious questions about judgment, oversight and the responsible use of taxpayers' money, regardless of the eventual decision of the court.

Those questions are particularly important because the City added a new part-time by-law enforcement position in 2026. The 12-month position is 24 hours per week and pays \$35.05 to \$41.27 an hour - approximately \$44,000 to \$51,500 in wages annually, before pension and other employment costs.

When Council approves additional staff positions at that kind of cost, taxpayers deserve to know that the additional capacity is necessary and being directed toward genuine community needs.

If cases like this are representative of the additional enforcement work that justified creating another position, then I disagree that taxpayers needed to fund it. I would rather see limited municipal resources directed toward enforcement issues that materially affect public safety, neighbourhoods and quality of life.