

# DAILY COMMERCIAL NEWS

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## AND CONSTRUCTION RECORD

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Infrastructure

Coalition greets Statistics Canada's report on aging public infrastructure with reservation

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A recent Statistics Canada report on the age of public infrastructure has received cautionary reviews from some Ontario construction industry officials.

The StatsCan study states that the average age of public infrastructure has fallen in almost every Canadian province for the past seven years. Ontario's public infrastructure averaged 15.4 years, followed by Prince Edward Island and Alberta which both recorded average ages below 16 years.

This decrease in the average age was primarily fueled by large investments in Ontario and Quebec highways and roads, the study found.

"The highways and roads results reflect what has been going on the last four or five years, no doubt about that," says Rob Bradford, Ontario Road Builders' Association executive director.

Highways and roads accounted for 57 per cent of Ontario's total public infrastructure stock in 2007. StatsCan finds that many years of strong investments after 1994 have lowered the average age of Ontario's road network from 16.8 to 13.9 years.

"There has been some good investment in highways by MTO (Ontario's Ministry of Transportation) with a lot of rehabilitation work. There definitely has been a good bit of catching up done," says Bradford. "Once again though, we see the same problems with bridges."

Ontario ranked third among provinces in the area of oldest bridge infrastructure after Quebec and Nova Scotia. Bridges and overpasses in Ontario accounted for seven per cent of its public infrastructure stock. Ontario's bridges and overpasses had passed an estimated 56 per cent of their useful life in 2007, compared to the national average of 57 per cent and Quebec's 72 per

cent.

“We know bridge work is a monster of job to do, especially for municipalities,” adds Bradford.

The age of water supply systems across Canada has dropped from 16.9 years in 2001 to 14.8 years in 2007. Nearly 40 per cent of that age reduction was attributable to Ontario, where its average age dropped to 13.1 years, the lowest it has been since the 1960s, reports StatsCan. Also, Ontario’s water supply systems passed only 36 per cent of its estimated useful life, compared with a national average of 40 per cent in 2007.

“Ongoing development and new investments in Barrie, Durham, Markham and Woodbridge have helped drive the numbers down and skewed the age picture,” says Frank Zechner, Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association executive director.

The study finds that the average age of storm and sewer systems rose slightly in all provinces except Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Ontario’s sanitary and storm sewers average age was at 18.4 years in 2002, dropping to only 18.3 years in 2007.

Also, 54 per cent of Ontario’s storm and sewer systems have passed their estimated useful life, compared to 53 per cent nationally.

“The systems in places like Toronto, Hamilton, Windsor and Kingston are aging,” says Zechner. “The aging has not stopped and you tend to get more leakage in storm and sewers. With all the snow we have recently had, if there is not a continuous melt, you will see heaving and breakdowns in these systems because of their age.”

Despite the study’s statements that the age of public infrastructure is declining, a municipal infrastructure gap of \$123 billion does exist the Infrastructure Investment Coalition says.

“The report’s stats can be misleading,” says coalition member and Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario executive director Andy Manahan. “Our infrastructure continues to age and we require more rehabilitation to close that gap.”