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Pipes a cash drain

Water loss costing taxpayers big bucks: Study

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Plugging the leaks in municipal water systems could save taxpayers close to \$1 billion annually, a study released yesterday estimates.

The report, commissioned by the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, pegs the cost of leaky and broken pipes at as much as \$700 million for water that doesn't reach their pipes, plus another \$300 million if the associated environmental costs are included.

But the author of the report, U of T civil engineering prof Tamer El-Diraby, said the provincial government should also consider the cost in terms of the amount of energy lost pumping water that never reaches a tap.

"There is no precise data but we estimate the leakage rate to be about 25%," he said yesterday. "That means the province is wasting energy every month."

Because municipalities, including Toronto, have in the past had policies of only fixing pipes after they break, El-Diraby said money could be saved if there was one giant push to fix all leaking mains as soon as possible.

He estimates that if the work done in the province in the last 10 years was completed a decade ago, taxpayers could have saved another \$160 million.

The report's findings could also have an effect on energy production in the province as well, said Andy Manahan, the alliance's executive director.

"If we can save electricity by plugging up leaks in the water system then we can perhaps eliminate the need for expansion of nuclear power in the province," Manahan said.

The city has been upping water rates by 9% over the last several years in order to pay for replacing aging pipes in the city, he said, calling it responsible.

Frank Zechner, the executive director of the Greater Toronto Sewer and Watermain Contractors Association, said the problem is that no one pays any attention to water mains until after they break.

"It's been out of sight, out of mind," Zechner said. "Until you actually dig them up you don't know what kind of condition they're in and as long as you turn on your tap or flush a toilet and everything moves you think that everything's fine, but just like a car that never has an oil change, things are going to catch up with you."

The report estimates municipal water systems have leakage rates from 10%-50% -- translating to roughly 327 million cubic metres of water every year. That's enough to fill 131,000 Olympic-sized pools. In the GTA alone, enough water escapes into the soil to fill 50,000 pools.

That means residential ratepayers are forking out for water that never reaches their homes and the province pays out for the additional energy needed to pump the leaking water.

Toronto states its leakage rate is about 7% -- which would be great if it's true, El-Diraby said.

"In our estimates we find that this rate should be around 20%," he said. "If the city would have more data to show it around 7% the happiest person on the Earth would be myself, but I find this a little bit hard to swallow given that some of the pipes in Toronto are 100 years old."

DROP BY DROP

A study by the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario has found that leakage rates in water pipes across the province range between 10% and 50%.

Each year about 327 million cubic metres of water is lost each year in Ontario -- enough to fill roughly 131,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools.

In the Greater Toronto Area alone, the leakage rate indicates a loss of more than 120 million cubic metres annually or about 50,000 Olympic pools.