



Reaching 'breaking point'; The gaping holes in funding of our roads, bridges, transit and sewers will be filled by your wallet

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Page: 20

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Two new reports released this past week add to the growing stack raising alarm over the state of infrastructure in this province and this country.

Infrastructure is the stuff most of us don't generally care about until something goes wrong -- water and sewer services, roads and bridges, transit and recreation facilities.

Staggering sums are needed for infrastructure repair, maintenance and new construction to compensate for decades of neglect and poor planning by municipal, provincial and federal politicians.

And that money will only come from one place -- your pocket.

The first report, produced for the Residential and Civil Construction Association of Ontario, conservatively estimates provincial municipalities need to spend \$2 billion over the next five years to fix, repair, replace and maintain local bridges.

Toronto, for example, faces \$180 million in bridge bills over that time; Kawartha Lakes \$32 million; Niagara Falls \$6.4 million.

And because the province finds it unnecessary to inspect Ontario's 12,000 municipal bridges, there's no assurance those bridges are safe, the report suggests.

It points to the deadly collapse of the de la Concorde overpass in Laval, Que. in Sept. 2006, which killed five people, in part a consequence of inadequate funding, provincial oversight and deferred maintenance.

Municipal officials here, through the Ontario Good Roads Association, insist provincial bridges are adequately inspected locally and generally safe but suggest many municipalities will struggle to pay for needed repairs and maintenance over the next decade.

Meanwhile, a second report on infrastructure out this week, prepared for the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, concluded there is a \$123-billion municipal infrastructure deficit across the country.

Ten years ago, that deficit was \$44 billion and 20 years ago just \$12 billion.

It has snowballed, the FCM report suggests, because public assets, commonly 30 to 50 years old or older, are rapidly aging since municipalities are ill-equipped to fund downloaded assets and because new infrastructure investment all but dried up for three decades prior to the year 2000.

Recent spending increases have not come close to compensating for those 30 years of neglect and municipalities, the FCM report concludes, are reaching the "breaking point."

Like the report on the state of Ontario's bridges, the FCM report calls for stable, long-term funding from senior government to address infrastructure needs.

Ottawa is reviewing the FCM report and has made generally supportive noises about supporting more municipal infrastructure spending.

Ontario's Minister for Infrastructure Renewal, David Caplan, said his government has more than doubled infrastructure spending to an average of \$6 billion annually.

\$100-BILLION DEFICIT

However, there is at least a \$100-billion infrastructure deficit in this province alone, by Caplan's estimate.

He suggests his government is closing the gap on funding needs but admits even provincial plans to cumulatively spend \$60 billion over the next 10 years "doesn't get us where we need to be."

Nor could you, he rightly points out, build or fix everything that's needed all at once.

Ontario has become an old house with bad plumbing, a pot-hole riddled driveway, leaky roof and endless number of small jobs to do, all coming out of the pocket of the homeowner.

That's not likely to change.

Ontario is reviewing funding for downloaded municipal services but Caplan has heard of no plans to upload infrastructure, as Quebec did with 4,400 municipal bridges following its tragic bridge collapse.

"I don't buy the fact that (municipalities) are incapable of making spending choices," Caplan said. "Like all of us, they have to prioritize."

So what does all of this mean?

Firstly, that in this province and indeed across the country, politicians are creating a massive infrastructure deficit, a mortgage, that will be passed on to future generations to pay.

Secondly, (as this was called for in the report on bridges) that increasingly local councils will turn to private sector "build-finance-operate" partnerships as well as tolls, substantively higher user fees and higher taxation to pay the bills to maintain and expand water, roads, bridges and other services.

Ontarians already pay the highest property tax bills in the country and our local leaders are becoming increasingly aggressive in expanding taxation boundaries. Taxpayers will certainly have to pay more.

Our politicians, however, will have to learn to get back to the basics, to fix the potholes, replace the water pipes and make the buses run on time.