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Stakeholders call for municipalities to self-finance water infrastructure

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Civil construction stakeholders believe that new provincial water legislation must require municipalities to self-finance and plan for water and wastewater infrastructure maintenance and growth.

“Experience has shown that without such requirements, the vast majority of municipalities will never implement plans to fully maintain and replace water and wastewater infrastructure as needed, nor charge user fees sufficient to finance such plans,” said Andy Manahan, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO).

Manahan was among a series of speakers, from labour unions to environmental law specialists, to provide recommendations and feedback about Ontario’s proposed Bill 72, The Water Opportunities and Water Conservation Act, 2010.

The standing committee on general government hosted a recent public hearing on the act at Queen’s Park.

Bill 72 aims to make Ontario a North American leader in the development and sale of technologies for water conservation and treatment.

The act encourages sustainable infrastructure and conservation planning, including using innovative technologies to solve water, wastewater and stormwater infrastructure challenges. The province has stated that the creation of an integrated approach to municipal water infrastructure planning would help achieve long-term system sustainability.

The Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association (OSWCA) believe that the proposed legislation will deliver system efficiency and necessary water-technology innovation. However, it needs to require municipalities to implement full-cost pricing plans, Joe Accardi, executive director of OSWCA, said at the hearing.

“We would like to see Bill 72 go further and have all municipalities prepare, approve and submit to the Minister of the Environment municipal sustainability plans,” Accardi said.

“We also feel that the environment minister should be able to mandate performance indicators and targets to ensure conservation targets and system optimization is reached.”

A 2008 Conference Board of Canada found that under-investment in core infrastructure like water and wastewater can be attributed to the municipal financial challenges, under-pricing of water services and the lack of making it a priority.

“One might argue that there is a fundamental disconnect between the long-term nature of water infrastructure planning and the short-term nature priorities of elected municipal councils,” concluded the report.

The RCCAO noted that 25 per cent of all processed water leaks into the ground after leaving treatment plants, due to faulty pipes; 30 per cent of all the energy consumed in pumping water is wasted due to such leakage and the cost of improperly maintained water and wastewater systems runs up to \$1 billion annually.

“Bill 72 provides a clear opportunity to ensure that municipalities go beyond just tracking their historical investment in water and wastewater assets to actually planning for and funding their ongoing needs,” added Manahan.