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Infrastructure

Expand industry's role in asset management

RCCAO hopes studies 'stimulate debate'

VINCE VERSACE
staff writer

The construction industry can be a key player in the future of water and wastewater asset management says the author of a report released today.

The sector should be "proactive and bring about plans for estimating and eliminating the deficit, establishing a governance scheme, and setting national IT standards as well as accountability and transparency standards," says Tamer El-Diraby, a University of Toronto professor commissioned to write the report for the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario.

"The industry must form a vision where they will gain bold and consistent investment in soft issues, such as people and knowledge development."

Water and Wastewater Asset Management in the GTA: Challenges and opportunities, is the report authored by El-Diraby.

RCCAO is also releasing a second study on financing water and sewer systems in the GTA.

RCCAO hopes the reports will "stimulate debate on ways to increase investment" in vital water and wastewater infrastructure in both the GTA and Ontario.

Asset management development can get marred by politics since it is governments which are generally responsible, notes El-Diraby. The construction industry should not wait for governments to lead them in this area since it has the tools at hand to start setting priorities and agendas for water and wastewater infrastructure management, says El-Diraby.

"They should even consider establishing and pooling experts to build and advocate preliminary regional plans and a priority list of projects," says El-Diraby. "The industry needs to invest in software and advanced planning techniques to formalize our knowledge in this regard. If it does not, it will be just left with building cookie-cutter houses."

Toronto's water assets are valued at \$8.7 billion and include: 5,015 km of distribution watermains, 510 km of trunk watermains, 52,900 valves, 40,460 hydrants, 470,202 water service connections and circulate 540 million litres of water a year.

Toronto's wastewater assets are valued at \$17.9 billion and include: four wastewater treatment plants, 4,397 km of sanitary sewers, 1,301 km of combined sanitary and storm water sewers and 358 km of trunk sewers, 4,305 km of storm sewers and 546 km of roadside ditches. There are 463,300 sewer service connections with 438 billion litres of wastewater treated annually. El-Diraby says Toronto is suffering from deferred maintenance and the huge deficit "may be more than any other Canadian city."

He recommends municipalities, both big and small, should take the lead in asset management which will then define the role federal and provincial governments should take.

"They should lead the drive by pooling their expertise and resources in initiatives with benchmarks which establish a vision and strategy for water and wastewater assets," explains El-Diraby.

Government grants and public funding should be tied to performance achievements and proof of long term and adequate plans for asset management. Increased accountability and transparency in the governance of asset management is important, says El-Diraby.

Ultimately, sharing knowledge and a collaborative effort is a recommendation not just for governments but the construction industry as well, says El-Diraby.

Capitalizing on the abilities and expertise of local human resources will strengthen the market for the Canadian construction community.

A focus on training in new technologies and green practices must develop industry wide.

"The industry must adopt a co-op-like approach and not a competitive one to develop and use best practices, in order to be more efficient and knowledge-based, so it can build more sustainable infrastructure and use advanced technology," explains El-Diraby.

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500 Hood Rd, 4th Flr., Markham, ON. L3R 9Z3
Phone: 905-752-5408 | Fax: 905-752-5450
Toll free: 800-465-6475 | Toll free Fax: 888-396-9413
E-mail: dcnonl@reedbusiness.com

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