

Ontario must build with the future in mind: expert

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When it comes to Ontario's infrastructure the adage, "if you build it they will come" may need some tweaking to, "if you build it, make sure it's built right and with the future in mind."



This is one of the messages behind a report by Michael Fenn, entitled *Building Our Tomorrow: The Future of Ontario's Infrastructure*. It was commissioned by the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO) and was largely prompted by the alliance's chair Phil Rubinoff.

In the report, Fenn acknowledges the provincial government's commitment to spend \$130 billion over 10 years, but asks various questions about what we should be doing to anticipate a different world in the future. What societal trends and new technologies will render some infrastructure unnecessary and what new methods will emerge?

Fenn states the report is not "to look not at infrastructure per say, but look at the major trends that society, the economy and the environment are facing and see how they might have an impact on infrastructure and correspondingly how some of those things might result in us having infrastructure that looks different than we're used to."

The report identifies several key findings around transportation, light, flexible and adaptable infrastructure and health care. It examines how "megatrends" and the rise of new infrastructure will impact the province between now and 2030.

"In some ways, looking at the way we do things and being more adaptable and flexible is an important ingredient," he says. "Our cycle time on things...are going to prove to be a lot quicker than we were used to in generations gone by. Therefore we shouldn't be reliant on embellishments to 19th century technology, we should be rethinking what we're doing in some areas."

New forms of infrastructure could emerge, he notes, when it comes to transportation, be it automated vehicle control, driver assisted vehicles, road-pricing regimes and in-vehicle technology, to name a few, or in the realm of rapid and public transit with platform-side doors, automated train control and multi-purpose fare-media.

Light, flexible and adaptable infrastructure may also be a reality in the future with the "convergence of miniaturization, pre-constructed components and new building materials," the report notes.

"While some long-lived infrastructure will be designed to be more resilient to address climate change impacts, other infrastructure will need to be adaptable or have a shorter life expectancy and amortization period than traditional structures."

This could be seen in the health care realm and may mean less emphasis on "bricks-and-mortar" hospitals and more attention to community health facilities, both public and private.

"The bottom line is that many of our conventional assumptions and established practices, even those that seem contemporary, can be swept away in a very short period of time," Fenn writes. "We have many recent examples of the folly of 'driving forward but looking backwards.' "

"This is not to say that there won't be any new hospitals built," adds RCCAO executive director Andy Manahan. "There's always going to be cycles in construction, in the ICI sometimes when institutional is up, industrial is down and vice versa. It's not saying the industry is going to shut down, it's going to have to adapt to future demand. Those that aren't ready to adapt are probably those that are going to fall behind."

Canadian futurist Richard Worzel also contributed to the report, with he and Fenn stating megatrends such as technological changes, globalization and demographic shifts will play a pivotal role in building infrastructure that changes Ontario. To accommodate this, the report makes three recommendations.

In order to build things right, the report suggests establishing a Policy Secretariat, which would include support for an "Ontario Future Council" made up of thought-leaders, decision-makers from the worlds of business, labour, government and academia, traditional and social media, non-profit organizations and the broader civil society.

Fenn also recommends engaging post-secondary, leading thinkers and health care scholars through infrastructure innovation grant funds.

"If people are just left to research the things that they find interesting we may or may not be well served by that," Fenn states. "I think it's important to commission work to say these are the problems that society's facing and we need solutions to."

His third recommendation calls for a Royal Commission on Ontario's Future, with a focus on the role that infrastructure plays and a future oriented economic development and infrastructure strategy.

"I think the concept of a Royal Commission has in some respects fallen out of favour, but if you look back historically at major turning points in Ontario...they were often framed after a wide ranging public consultation conducted by leading thinkers and decision-makers using the Royal Commission format," he explains. "It's a device that has merit."

Fenn writes that the flurry of activity in the infrastructure field can only mean more work for the construction trades, albeit in a different fashion.

"In much the same way that the job of the automobile mechanic has morphed from engine repair to computer diagnostician, the new infrastructure's impact on skilled workers will not so much displace old skills as require them to be supplemented and reframed," the report reads.