

Huge volumes of drinking water being wasted in Sarnia's leaky pipes

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Sarnia's leaky and broken pipes are pumping vast amounts of treated drinking water into the ground each and every year.

In fact, about 16% of the water Sarnia buys from the Lambton Area Water Supply System is lost somewhere along the 502 kilometre-long distribution system, said city engineer David Jackson.

“We have many water mains that are well past their intended lifespan.”

About 40% of Sarnia's \$400-million water system is old – as in 50 to 90 years old – and about 110 kilometres of pipe are rated in very poor condition, according to the city's asset management plan.

Fifty years is the typical age at which water mains fail.

All that crumbling infrastructure is expensive, with the cost of the lost water going directly onto the fixed portion of property owner water bills.

Each year, Sarnia loses about \$1 million in what's called “non-revenue” water.

Much of it is lost through leaky underground pipes, but some is also used in municipal buildings, hydrant testing and firefighter training.

Sarnia doesn't know exactly how much drinking water is lost in underground leaks and how much is municipal use because city-owned buildings don't have water meters, something that is currently being addressed, Jackson said.

"There are real financial impacts from having old infrastructure... and real problems that come from that," he said. "So it's kind of another reminder of the importance to invest."

The problem isn't unique to Sarnia. According to a recent study by the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, Ontario municipalities waste millions of cubic metres of treated drinking water each year.

"It's incredibly inefficient and almost single handedly defeating our water conservation goals when treated drinking water never makes it to the taps because of leaky pipes," said executive director Nadia Todorova.

Toronto, with a leakage rate of 15%, loses about 100 million litres a day.

The treated water lost in Ontario each year could fill 15,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools, the Alliance said.

"The findings of this study are alarming because they confirm that our water infrastructure is aging and in dire need of repair," Todorova said.