

OTTEY: Dodging an economic pothole

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Cars try to dodge a series of potholes along O'Connor Dr. on March 13, 2019. Photo by Jack Boland /Toronto Sun/Postmedia Network

Potholes You hate them, I hate them.

We all expect our public infrastructure – from roads to sidewalks to bridges – to be safe.

COVID-19 has placed infrastructure repair work at risk of being cancelled. Cash-strapped municipalities, facing empty coffers as a result of the pandemic, are reallocating maintenance

funds to make up for budget shortfalls. That means cancelling the annual projects that taxpayers expect.

It's an issue that goes well beyond potholes – tens of thousands of jobs hang in the balance.

State of good repair (SOGR) projects, the regular infrastructure maintenance work seen across cities year-round, are a critical source of employment. For their employers, these projects are a matter of survival.

Without SOGR projects, the industry expects a minimum of 41,000 workers will be laid off. After this year's economic turmoil, our province cannot afford this magnitude of industry-wide layoffs. Main Street cannot afford these layoffs.

Take Toronto for example. Facing a \$2 billion deficit, the city had to reallocate \$350 million previously earmarked for infrastructure maintenance.

But don't blame Mayor Tory. He has to balance the budget – it's the law.

While the provincial and federal governments have committed to transferring \$550 million to the City of Toronto, the money hasn't flowed yet. And it won't be enough.

Despite the Mayor, the Prime Minister and the Premier all working together to fix this problem, the 2020 construction season is lost. We cannot afford for them to make the same mistake in 2021.

And it's not just Toronto – cities across Ontario will need help to balance their books.

For thousands of workers, no SOGR projects in 2021 means no jobs. And employers are not optimistic. The shortage of project tenders now suggests that there will be even less work in the year to come. All levels of government must act immediately to save thousands of jobs in 2021.

The infrastructure that keeps our cities moving needs maintenance. Canadian winters are tough on our infrastructure. That means we cannot afford to postpone repair work. If we don't do it now, we will see major damage to our roads, bridges, water mains, and much more, which will come with an even bigger price tag for taxpayers.

We can prevent that, all while igniting our economy.

Municipalities have already allocated money to SOGR projects. Nobody is asking for new spending or extravagant projects. We need municipalities to spend the money that they already set aside for their regular infrastructure maintenance.

This year, all levels of government have worked together to keep Canadians safe. We believe they can also work together to fix our infrastructure and get our local economies moving again.

These projects are investments into our communities. And right now, they're needed more than ever. SOGR work is a proven, costed, and prudent approach to bringing money back to Main Street. They're a tested way to support the good paying jobs that our communities and countless families rely on.

For taxpayers, the results are measurable. By maintaining our infrastructure now, municipalities can prevent longer, more extensive repair work in the years to come.

The projects are shovel-ready, and our workers are prepared to do their part in the province's economic recovery. The only thing missing is an all-government approach to supporting our municipalities on the road ahead.

– Jason Ottey is the Director of Government Relations and Communications for Laborers' International Union of North America (LiUNA) Local 183