

Editorial: An infrastructure levy? No way

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If in doubt, add another tax. Crumbling roads and leaky sewers? Better slap on an infrastructure levy.

The idea has been bouncing around city hall this week. To nobody's surprise, the National Capital Heavy Construction Association (whose members benefit from the jobs created by infrastructure dollars) says it's a good idea. Coun. Diane Deans says it should be considered. And the city's long-term plan says that if higher levels of government don't permanently set aside more money, a levy should be examined.

But why? Isn't the federal government running a \$30-billion deficit, this year alone, at least partly to finance infrastructure development? Hasn't it promised \$125 billion over 10 years in infrastructure spending? Isn't Premier Kathleen Wynne's government advancing the sale of 60 per cent of Hydro One for infrastructure money here in Ontario?

There is, politicians would have voters believe, scads of cash out there to be pumped into infrastructure projects. Why, then, discuss another tax? If the city needs money for various renovations, shouldn't it approach other levels of government first, before considering increasing the tax burden locally?

Part of the problem, as city treasurer Marian Simulik says, is that while the city does receive federal and provincial money, it's "sporadic" and usually goes towards big projects in the transportation master plan. In other words, politicians at other levels of government fund what they think will bring them political advantage. There's sex appeal to a light-rail project, or a new bridge. These things allow for big announcements (usually at every stage of the project) with big cheques and photo ops and a chance for politicians to secure their personal legacies.

There's less gain for these leaders from helping a municipality replace sewer mains or redo crumbling sidewalks. An infrastructure levy existed once, under then-mayor Larry O'Brien, but Mayor Jim Watson has kept an iron grip on tax increases in this town.

Alas, the sewers really do need fixing and the roads need paving. It's cities that focus on these small but vital needs. If projects are funded just for their flashiness, not their everyday utility, the infrastructure gap in Canada will worsen.

Politicians like to forget that there is only one taxpayer – regardless of which level of government is spending the money or making the announcement. If we grumble about the municipality not fixing things, let's be sure to direct those grumbles toward our local MPPs and MPs too, since the province and federal government make many key decisions on infrastructure funding. Better co-ordination, a better sense of priorities, between cities and other governments, is the right way forward. Until taxpayers see that, they don't need another levy.