

The city does a terrible job keeping our roads in good shape. Here's one way to fix it



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A modified street sign along a road in Carp.

Noted tax fighter Mayor Jim Watson has been quick to extinguish the idea of an infrastructure levy to fix our crumbling roads, calling the concept “a fancy way of raising taxes by another two or three per cent without saying it.”

Well yes, exactly. Were the city to institute a road tax, some might start to wonder why we need high property taxes if three of the city’s most basic services – roads, sewers and water – were being paid for with user fees.

And yet, the mayor’s approach does nothing to address the fact that many of our roads are in substandard condition. The cause is simple. The city just doesn’t spend enough money to maintain its vast network of roads.

Watson admitted as much when he said, “We have spent a record amount of money in infrastructure this term and last term of council and yet it never seems to be enough and we never seem to whittle down the infrastructure deficit.”

At the same time, the mayor would have us believe that the roads are mostly fine and only a few people are fussing.

“I tend to be one of those people in a crow’s nest looking 30,000 feet out,” Watson said. “That’s the job of leaders around the council table. It’s not to panic because a couple of people have called and said there are too many pot holes in one street.”

Maybe the city’s roads look pretty good from the crow’s nest, but they don’t look so great from ground level. City councillors expressed concern about deteriorating roads at the transportation committee, right before recommending a budget that will fall well short of fixing them.

Councillors aren’t telling drivers anything they don’t know, but observations about our bad roads are not just anecdotal. They are backed up by a major assessment of city assets done by staff in 2012. The report uncovered the fact that 27 per cent of the city’s roads were in poor or very poor condition. Of the rest, 52 per cent were fair and only 21 per cent were good or very good. A grade of very poor means “unfit for sustained service” and poor means “at risk.” Even the fair designation means roads “require attention.”

The city’s spending on road repair has been inconsistent, a fact not readily discerned by examining city budgets.

In 2011, Ottawa spent only \$35 million on road renewal. Then the numbers went up to about \$45 million a year for three years before sagging back to just \$32 million in 2015. This year, the city spent \$47 million and it says it will spend \$56 million next year. Its ultimate target is \$85 million a year.

The city does have a 10-year plan to boost road repairs, but it depends on new federal and provincial money that hasn’t been forthcoming. Not that there is no money available from the other governments. The city receives \$88 million a year in gasoline tax money from the feds and the province. Although it is a tax paid by drivers, the money isn’t spent on roads. It all goes to transit.

Ottawa’s poor roads are not caused by a shortage of money, but rather by a choice to spend what we’ve got to expand transit rather than rebuild roads. That’s not a choice council is going to reverse. The light rail train has left the station.

So how to look after our roads?

Here’s a radical idea. Rather than a big new tax or a half-baked job, why not eliminate road rebuilding from the city budget entirely and cut taxes accordingly. Then bring in a road rebuilding levy that would be 100-per-cent dedicated to roads, with clear targets and annual reporting on progress. Under this plan, taxpayers would pay a bit more, but at least they would know they are getting something for their money.

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