

## Opinion

# Manitobans agree communities need help

*By Councillor Doug Dobrowolski, President  
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Many Manitobans have an opinion about public infrastructure, with good reason: they start their days using municipal streets, roads, and sidewalks to get to work or school, and end them by visiting community centres to access recreation and leisure opportunities. Much of this infrastructure is in poor condition, yet according to *The Economist*, Canadian municipalities “lack both money and powers” to address growing infrastructure needs. This leading international publication highlighted the fact that municipalities in Canada “get only eight cents out of every tax dollar”, with the majority of municipal revenue coming from property taxes. With municipal budgets being squeezed tighter each year, some municipalities, like the City of Brandon, are looking at implementing significant tax increases this year just to keep up.

The Association of Manitoba Municipalities (AMM) conducted a poll recently to find out what Manitobans think the priorities of the new provincial government should be over the next four years. When asked which of five areas should benefit if the provincial government were to dedicate additional revenues from the P.S.T. to a specific purpose, 44 per cent of respondents indicated they would dedicate these funds to community infrastructure improvement—well ahead of the numbers recorded in favour of health care (27 per cent) and education (11 per cent).

Respondents were further asked if they would support a one-cent Municipal Sales Tax on the condition that these funds would be used only for infrastructure renewal projects. 64 per cent of Manitobans supported this idea—an increase of 10 per cent from 2008, when the same question was asked in a similar poll.

What these numbers really illustrate is that people understand the connection between infrastructure funding and a healthy, prosperous community. They also show that citizens understand the increasing demands they are putting on their local governments. Today, Manitobans naturally and rightfully demand not only essential services like snow clearing and garbage collection, but infrastructure like multi-use recreation facilities. These amenities are important for health, quality of life and sense of community.

Often, facilities that contribute to our health and wellness—and thus reduce health care costs —must take a back seat to the infrastructure we don’t see, like crumbling water and sewer lines. A recent *Forbes* article refers to infrastructure as “every system under and above ground that allows us to enjoy this thing we call modern civilization. Without well-functioning infrastructure, we’d have nothing even approaching a first world existence.” However, new infrastructure is impossible to achieve when the

existing infrastructure is anything but well-functioning. In fact, it is breaking down as fast as it can be repaired.

In Gimli, for example, the sewer and water systems were built in 1957, and are now costing taxpayers \$100,000 a year just to be patched up. Mayor Lynn Greenberg is quick to note Gimli has been fortunate to receive federal and provincial funding for both new and aging infrastructure in the past, but there remains a considerable laundry list of needs in the area. “Waterline replacement will be a \$10M job, sewer line renewal is an \$833,000 job, a regional water system will total \$34 million, and we still owe almost \$8 million on our sewage treatment facility that will mature in 2032,” stated Greenberg. “Where are we going to get the money for all this?”

Other municipalities have pressing issues as well. “Our RM is 640 square miles and we have many citizens without access to rural water,” says Reeve Kam Blight of the RM of Portage la Prairie. “Without access to safe drinking water, quality of life goes downhill.”

I heard these examples and dozens more last summer while on a tour of Manitoba communities as part of the AMM’s Putting Communities First campaign. They illustrate why the AMM has been calling for a greater portion of revenue from the government to be dedicated solely to municipal infrastructure. This money would generate millions of dollars per year to be shared directly with Manitoba’s 197 municipalities. There is no doubt revenue over and above existing levels would be a positive step forward in addressing Manitoba’s estimated \$11 billion infrastructure deficit, as councils would be able to address the specific infrastructure needs of their communities.

Premier Greg Selinger, whose party pledged millions of dollars to health care during last fall’s provincial election campaign, told delegates at the AMM Annual Convention in November that he would not consider a Municipal Sales Tax. Yet as Winnipeg Mayor Sam Katz asked just days before the election, “What’s the point of investing more money into health care if ambulances can’t navigate our roads?”

More and more Manitobans show that they are in favour of dedicated funding to solve infrastructure priorities. Greater funding in this area would generate much-needed economic spin-offs, as well. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities says for every \$1 invested in local infrastructure, federal, provincial and territorial governments receive a combined 35 cents, mainly through new income and sales tax.

In other words, infrastructure spending is not a drain—it is an investment that will help communities. And according to the AMM’s poll, 9 out of 10 Manitobans agree that our communities need help.