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Huge amount of work needed in GTA, bleak report says

BY PATRICK MANGION
Staff Writer

Infrastructure always seems to get the short end of the stick.

It's taken for granted the pipes and sewers underneath York Region communities will handle all the new homes being built.

If infrastructure has elbowed its way into dinner-table conversation, there's probably a problem somewhere and, as a taxpayer or homeowner, you may be asked to dig deeper into your pocket to correct it.

Now, a warning has been issued stating to maintain safe water and sewer



DAVE BARROW: Don't use private sector to fix problems, Richmond Hill mayor says.

service, billions of dollars need to be injected into withering municipal infrastructure.

"Most municipalities in the GTA

rehabilitate significantly less than 1 per cent of their water and sewer assets annually. Much of the infrastructure is already operating beyond its useful life," according to a report by Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, a lobby group, comprised of construction associations and unions.

"The old way of doing things no longer works. We need to consider some fresh approaches," said Andy Manaham, executive director of the alliance.

Key among the report's recommendations are raising water and sewer charges to make them reflective of the true cost and variable rate metering that would reflect the time of day and season water is used.

Private-sector funding would also help ease the burden for municipalities, the report stated.

But it's not a route Richmond Hill Mayor Dave Barrow is comfortable taking.

"I don't think we want to play around with the private sector when it comes to our water. There are too many regulations," the mayor said.

The town has been able to keep up with repairs and maintenance of existing infrastructure, he added.

However, a report from town staff earlier this month indicated as the town reaches build-out, reserves used for repairs could run dry within 12 years.

But the present has as many pressing concerns as the future, Mr. Barrow said.

"Having the water and sewer infrastructure to meet growth requirements is the biggest problem we have," he said.

Richmond Hill is two years behind schedule, due mainly to the fact water and sewer cannot keep pace with growth that has already been approved.

"There will be little (housing) activity until 2010 or 2011," Mr. Barrow said.

The municipality had been churning out 2,000 to 3,000 building permits a year, which has now dropped to about 500 annually.

The problem is compounded by the fact Richmond Hill, along with many GTA municipalities, has been identified as a growth area by the province.

But the infrastructure crunch hasn't reached the crisis stage, Mr. Barrow said.

The region's general manager of water and waste water, Debbie Korolnek, agreed.

"It's an issue all across Canada. But we're well positioned in York Region," she said.

"Our infrastructure is still young. We're not worried. But it's a priority for us."

While the alliance pointed to the success of private-sector intervention in the United Kingdom, Ms Korolnek said that was necessitated by the poor condition of its infrastructure, compared to the GTA.

However, she agreed homeowners will bear the cost to maintain high water and sewer standards.

"Rates will go up. Probably 10 per cent a year for a few years," she said.

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