

Communities struggle to meet infrastructure needs

If Ontario was your house, it would be on the verge of falling apart. The roof needs reshingling, the electrical system is ailing and the furnace is on its last legs. Forget about the fact the bathroom hasn't been redone since the 1970s. You've taken loans and are maxing out credit cards to pay for just part of what needs to be done. A Metroland Special Report shows that's the situation for Ontario municipalities as they struggle to fix our crumbling infrastructure — the roads, buildings, water and sewer systems that underpin our daily life.

BY DAVID FLEISCHER
AND NICOLE VISSCHEDYK
Special report

Alan Howard knew there was something wrong even before he got home.

The Thornhill resident was returning from a camping trip with his wife, Janice, on an August day in 2005, not knowing the rainstorm through which they'd been driving had flooded roads throughout southern York Region.

But the stranded cars and high water lines they could see as they pulled up to their house soon made it clear their neighbourhood was hit unusually hard.

The Howard home was one of hundreds flooded by the flash storm as aging storm sewers became overloaded. Mr. Howard soon found the damage wrought by the six inches of water that had flooded his basement.

Though water had risen several inches up his above-ground basement windows, the water that caused the damage had come bubbling up through his basement drain.

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"We have a house that's well-maintained ... to have water go two-feet deep on our lawn because it can't drain away, I don't think there's a way to defend against that," he says.

The Howards were relatively lucky, with their insurance company covering the expenses of replacing carpeting, electronics, a furnace, freezer and other possessions irreparably damaged by the sewage backup.

Mr. Howard tries to be optimistic these days but admits he has second thoughts when the skies turn grey and rain clouds roll in.

"We're not really worried," he says. "On the other hand, it's always in the back of your mind. You just never know."

More than five years later, no solution has yet been implemented for replacement of the inadequate pipes running below the neighbourhood.

A study found everything from poor drainage to downspouts connecting to the sewer system contributed to the overload and the Town of Markham concluded it will take \$40 million to bring the system up to date. While residents wait, hoping another



PHOTO BY IAN WILLMS/THE TORONTO STAR

Sinkholes are becoming more common, opening huge gaps in roads when broken underground pipes collapse or the surface gives out.

A METROLAND MEDIA SPECIAL REPORT

CONCRETE PROBLEMS

How to fix our crumbling infrastructure

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storm isn't coming, town officials are trying to figure out how they can pay for the needed infrastructure.

It's a "thorny issue," Mr. Howard says.

The situation in Thornhill shows how widespread and expensive is the need, despite recent government stimulus program funding.

Across the region, more than \$235 million worth of infrastructure projects — from community centre refits to road resurfacing — moved forward in the last two years.

But the region expects to spend more than \$1 billion this year alone on such projects — more than \$8 billion over the coming decade — and as welcome as the one-time funding it was, it wasn't a solution to a persistent problem.

It's a problem common to most Ontario communities today.

By the province's own estimates, there is

BY THE NUMBERS

The province's \$30-billion ReNew Ontario fund, created in 2005, was supposed to run for five years, but the money was used up by 2009. Tracking exactly where it went is difficult because annual reports were published only for 2006 and 2007 and no final report was issued. Here is the information the province was able to provide:

- 15 per cent (about \$4 billion) went to hospitals and health facilities.
- 22 per cent went to education projects, predominantly the \$4-billion Good Places to Learn program. It included \$2.25 billion to repair crumbling schools.

► 40 per cent went to transit and transportation projects, including \$700 million for extension of the Spadina subway from Toronto into Vaughan, one of the largest amounts. Funds also went to GO Transit, expanding the border crossing at Queenston-Lewiston and improving Hamilton's express bus service. Another large-scale component was the \$3.4 billion southern Ontario highways program.

► The remaining 23 per cent is not itemized in detail but includes about \$1.4 billion for water and environment projects, \$784 million for justice, just more than \$3 billion for local/municipal infrastructure and nearly \$2.7 billion merely classified as "other."

\$100 billion worth of unrepaired or unbuilt infrastructure in Ontario, with no funds available to fix or build it. That infrastructure gap can be seen more clearly every day in roadway sinkholes, flooded storm systems and deteriorating public buildings.

Ontario communities are struggling without success to meet their infrastructure needs, despite several years of stimulus funding. While the \$3.4-billion infrastructure program created jobs and helped kick-start the economy, even Ontario Infrastructure Minister Bob Chiarelli concedes the stimulus programs made only a "dent".

"I think it will be a long time before it will be easy, but collectively, we need to do it smarter," Mr. Chiarelli acknowledged.

A Metroland Special Report shows Ontario communities increasingly are borrowing and going into debt — some for the first time

in decades — to deal with a worsening situation. Long-term needs are overwhelming.

Metroland surveyed 20 municipalities for data on everything from the amount of money received from Ottawa and Queen's Park to long-term infrastructure needs. (See chart on next page.)

- More than half, including Milton and York Region, have introduced a tax or levy specifically to help pay for infrastructure projects;

- More than half measure their expected capital costs over the next decade in billions of dollars, including York at \$8 billion by 2020;

- Three-quarters report they are currently short at least \$160 million for future infra