

Sewer pipes

April 2015 Column by Gord Hume

The issue of sewer pipes and water lines is rarely the chief topic of conversation around the dinner table--until the day you can't flush, or there's no water coming from your tap. Then it skyrockets to the top of your priority list.

Like all Canadian municipalities, London is facing some tough challenges as it improves its underground pipes. The recent news that the 2014 water and sewer budgets were in a deficit was hardly a surprise. We've gotten better at conservation, which for a water budget is a double-edged sword.

Another big part of the reason was the lousy weather this winter. Very cold weather exacerbates the problems of water main breaks. London is actually ahead of many cities because of a thoughtful program over the past number of years to replace and upgrade sewers and water mains.

It may surprise you that London still has nearly 22kms (out of more than 1400 kms of sanitary pipes under our roads) of combined wastewater and storm water sewers that go back a hundred years or so. The city is actively tackling these combined sewer runs as part of its overall lifecycle replacement and system improvement programs.

The basement flooding problems that plagued several neighbourhoods in the 80s and 90s have to a large extent been resolved. That is because the city council of the day made a substantial commitment to accelerate sewer repairs, worked with homeowners to reduce groundwater problems around basements and foundations, improved storm water drainage and invested in better sewer connections.

The issue today facing many homes is that the old way of building permitted drainage through the weeping tiles to be released into sanitary sewers. When there are heavy rains it puts additional stress on sanitary sewers and can lead to overflows, which is not acceptable. London's Engineering department is leading the way with a program to separate any cross-connections between the storm pipe system and the sanitary pipe system.

Investing large amounts of money in underground infrastructure—and water mains and sewer lines are always big-money projects because of the work involved—is one of the key tests of any city council. It is comparatively easy to push sewer repairs, replacements and upgrades 'down the road' when budget discussions get heated and the dollars add up to large property tax increases.

‘Out of sight, out of mind’ is the thought process for many city councillors when confronting these difficult spending decisions. There is a cumulative impact from city councils of years or even decades ago that did just that—defer necessary spending on municipal infrastructure. As homeowners understand, delaying work on a new roof or not repairing window or foundation leaks simply makes the eventual problem bigger and more expensive. It’s the same thing for cities.

We don’t yet understand fully the implications of some decisions by the previous city council in its failed efforts to do four years of zero-tax increases. We don’t know what impact some of their decisions on spending—or not spending—will ultimately have on our community.

It is very difficult for Canadian municipalities to play catch-up on road and sewer repairs, simply because our property tax system is so flawed. Cities desperately need access to other forms of revenue, perhaps most obviously a piece of consumption taxes. Regardless, Londoners will need to be valiant as they assess the state of our infrastructure.

Roads, sewers and water mains are just part of the increasing municipal infrastructure deficit in Canadian cities. What is disappointing is that we aren’t even having a serious discussion with the other orders of government about the desperate need for solutions.

The infrastructure deficit can’t be solved just on the backs of local property taxpayers. It will take a determined national effort. So far there is no indication of strong federal or provincial political leadership stepping forward to make this a Canadian priority.

London voters should make it a key element of the upcoming federal election campaign.