

# What the Public Needs to Know About the Municipal Infrastructure Deficit

*The people who live in our cities need to understand what is at stake. Local officials need to do a better job of communicating that.*

BY: [Gord Hume](#) | March 26, 2018

Few would disagree that infrastructure is the platform for how municipalities improve the lives of their citizens. Across North America, smart infrastructure investments enhance connectivity, both physically and electronically. Infrastructure is the foundation for building smart, modern economies.

The disagreement, of course, is over how we should pay for renewing our infrastructure.

The hard numbers are depressingly familiar: the American Society of Civil Engineers' D+ rating for U. S. Infrastructure, with estimates for 'fixing' it ranging into the trillions of dollars.

So are the political realities, including the continued lack of serious leadership on this issue from the White House and the deep partisan chasms that divide Congress. As Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn noted plaintively in an interview for "[Getting Cities Right](#)," a book I authored last year, "To think that we can't even get a Surface Transportation Act passed. ... When did building roads and rail become a partisan issue?"

But -- and this is an important but -- local-government officials are equally to blame. Generally speaking, mayors and council members have done a poor job of educating their constituents about the size, scope and urgency of this problem -- our municipal infrastructure deficit.

Few people give thought to the sewers beneath their streets, until the morning they can't flush; then the sewer system shoots to the top of their priority list. They grumble about potholes and crumbling bridges. They mutter to their friends at the coffee shop about flooding problems after a big rain. They complain about poor bus service or the state of public housing.

What they don't understand is the larger picture. Infrastructure is the glue that holds together the economic, cultural, environmental and social structures that create more civilized communities. These investments are what drive a thriving city in this era of global competition for investments, talent, entrepreneurs and young families.

Municipal officials need to step up with information, ideas and leadership. But before we can begin to have a meaningful conversation with the public about the municipal infrastructure deficit, we need to be clear among ourselves about the elements that make up the infrastructure that our prosperity depends on. These can be summarized in five categories:

- 1. Horizontal:** The hard services for which a municipality is traditionally responsible: streets, bridges, sewers, water pipes, treatment plants, transit systems and so on.
- 2. Technology:** No city can survive or attract investment and talent without a reliable electricity grid, high speed broadband and cellular service. And of increasing importance are the "smart city" technologies that link the components of our infrastructure together through networks of sensors that provide data on everything from traffic flow to maintenance needs.
- 3. Creative:** This encompasses all the elements that combine to provide the quality of life that residents want from their communities, such as libraries, parks, trees, a vibrant downtown and affordable housing.
- 4. The "MUSH" sector:** The investments that municipalities, universities and colleges, schools (elementary and secondary) and hospitals and other health-care facilities make to ensure that residents can receive the services, care and opportunities they need for a healthy, productive life.
- 5. Federal and state:** These infrastructure obligations of other levels of government that directly impact local prosperity, such as harbors, regional public transportation and interstate highways.

Local governments have neither the resources nor the financial capacity to pay for all of their badly-needed infrastructure improvements. Without state, federal and private-sector dollars -- in the billions -- the U.S. infrastructure problems can't

be fixed. Where is that money coming from? That is the challenge facing all elected officials, but again, there has been little thoughtful discussion between and among the various levels of government.

After any waste and fat have been cut from civic budgets, the hard truth is that it may take raising some taxes. In a political time when tax-cutting is fashionable, that will be a difficult position for local policymakers.

Successful cities around the world typically get large financial support from their central governments, or the local government is granted significant tax authority. Cities need sustainable, reliable new sources of revenue if they are going to provide the infrastructure that their residents need and demand.

There needs to be a much greater understanding of the immediate and serious infrastructure problems facing municipalities and the need to develop new and innovative methods of financing the needs of our cities. Creating that understanding is a job for the public officials whose governments are closest to the people.

This article was printed from: <http://www.governing.com/commentary/col-cities-officials-municipal-infrastructure-deficit.html>