

NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE SUMMIT

Gord Hume...September 14, 2012

The 2nd National Infrastructure Summit last week in Regina was a successful forum that brought together important speakers, delegates from across the country and some interesting ideas on how to change the system that has brought Canada to this massive infrastructure crisis.

Mayor Pat Fiocco, in his national swansong, and city staff ran a well-organized conference that combined the private sector, municipal delegates from across the country and reps from other orders of government, unions and leading hi-tech companies.

The conference was held under the spotlight of the recent highway ramp sink-hole in Ottawa that closed an important transportation route in our nation's capital, and the release of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities report card on the state of municipal 'physical' infrastructure.

Regrettably the conference and the associated ideas and presentations didn't receive the national media attention which they deserved, but hopefully the information will serve as another useful foundation piece to rebuild Canada. We still need to convince senior orders of government that we are falling behind in the global economy as new cities are being built in China, Asia, India and the Middle East. Canada needs a much stronger national commitment to provide cities with contemporary and efficient infrastructure.

Speaker after speaker emphasized that local government does not have the economic or tax fire-power to pay for infrastructure on the property tax base. The growing infrastructure issues are exacerbated by a challenging economic climate in many parts of the country which are driving a 'zero increase' for many city councils. The problem with that, of course, is it means you're going backwards.

In my speech to the full conference, I proposed that the true infrastructure deficit was in fact substantially higher than we have been acknowledging. In addition to the physical (roads, pipes, etc), I proposed that we have to include four other key segments: technology (electricity, telecommunications, etc); creative (to build appealing cities we need to also invest in libraries, parks, public spaces, etc); health and education (cities are increasingly being expected to contribute significant capital dollars to local hospitals, universities, etc); and finally, the provincial, territorial and federal governments need to immediately fix their responsibilities that directly impact municipal prosperity (Trans Canada highway, ferry service, etc).

Looked at in this context, as I concluded, "We don't know the true number, we don't have a plan and we don't have the financing". Most of all, I suggested, "We need to develop a national sense of urgency about this issue, because it directly impacts every town and city in Canada."

My remarks seemed to strike a chord with the audience, as did a number of other key presentations. The discussion about solutions and ideas went from the conference room to break-out sessions to the hotel bar. The lively debate and ideas generated created a solid foundation upon which to build next steps in this important national issue.

For those who couldn't be there, many presentations will be posted on the conference web site. Canada needs innovation, creativity and bold thinking to tackle the infrastructure problems confronting our municipalities. We certainly need a greater commitment from the federal government for future reliable and growing infrastructure investments and assistance to municipalities. We also need provincial and territorial governments to work positively to develop new relationships with their towns and cities, and to support new funding mechanisms that will help municipalities rely less on the antiquated property tax base system.

The 2nd National Infrastructure Summit was a success and adds an important dimension to this vital national debate.