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NIAGARA AT WORK



Highway construction along the Niagara Falls section of the QEW near McLeod Road recently.

staff photo by Denis Cahill

Potholes new money pits

Delaying maintenance on roads means more expensive repairs later

By BILL CURRIE
Standard Staff

David Semley is Niagara's own road warrior.

The newly elected president of the Ontario Road Builders Association and head of the Hard Rock Group of paving and contracting companies in Port Colborne is taking his fight for improved road financing to municipal, provincial and federal governments.

He is battling an idea more than a foe. He calls it "the paradox of thrift."

For years, the holders of government purse strings have agreed about the need for ongoing road repair. But because a comprehensive road maintenance program isn't ever a government's highest priority, transportation budgets are often squeezed and few projects get the green light when they should.

The situation is increasingly unacceptable to Semley and others in the road construction business, who depend on steady contracts to maintain employment and its economic spinoffs.

The problem is deeper than keeping construction workers on the blacktop. Maintenance becomes more difficult and much more expensive the longer roads are neglected. Once roads break down entirely, repair becomes impossible and the road must be reconstructed at a much higher cost.

Apart from protecting road investments and keeping long-term repair costs low, well-maintained roads attract new investment. For road users, better roads are safer, and they reduce travel time and operating costs. Time wasted

on roads is money for many businesses. The problem continues to be convincing politicians to spend the money.

After Semley was elected as head of his 75-member provincial association this spring, he pledged to lobby all levels of government for infrastructure investments.

Semley quickly fixed on the federal government as his first target.

Federal transfers for highways are particularly lacking in central and Western provinces and the territories, all of which received nothing in the past three years. They won't get another dime for two more years, according to a breakdown of Transport Canada investments by the Coalition to Renew Canada's Infrastructure.

Federal dollars are also scheduled to dry up for Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island this year.

The report says \$17 billion is needed to bring the national highway system up to acceptable standards.

While the province has been funneling a few more dollars into municipal coffers for road construction and repair, it remains difficult to convince either government of the scope of the urgency.

It's just not a motherhood issue, not like funding health care or education. People just don't warm up to spending tax dollars on potholes — until they slam into one.

"There tends to be a lack of recognition of the importance of an efficient and well-maintained infrastructure system," Semley said.

Health care and education are im-

mediate needs.

"In the road construction and maintenance business, there is always an option to postpone," he said. "It may not be a good option, it may not be an economically viable option, but it's there. It's quite frankly a bad decision to do that."

The situation is becoming critical, according to a January 2001 report prepared by BDO Dunwoody and Associates Ltd. for the Heavy Construction Association of Regional Niagara.

The report says the funding trend is alarming.

"While trying to lower taxes and cut expenses, municipalities have been subject to downloading of services," it states. "Where infrastructure maintenance and capital has fallen victim to fiscal restraint, a potentially disastrous financial situation is developing."

When municipalities don't keep up with preventative maintenance programs in the

first 12 years of a road's life, the road deteriorates. It then has to be renewed at up to 80 times the cost of early maintenance. If left beyond 15 years, many paved roads begin to break up and replacement is the only option — at more than three times the renewal cost and 250 times the cost of preventative work.

Niagara could save at least \$100 million if it spends \$47.2 million on its roads over the next three years, the report concludes.

The Region is beginning to take action. In April, regional council approved a finance committee decision to establish a \$900,000 reserve fund to supple-

ment capital spending specifically for road maintenance and rehabilitation.

Regional Chair Debbie Zimmerman told the finance committee it would provide a buffer for financing the roads budget without using the general tax levy.

Zimmerman acknowledged many of the Region's road projects were on hold. "We are so far behind in our roads capital program," she told the committee.

The fund was linked to federal and provincial SuperBuild infrastructure funds, with the intention of drawing money from those governments.

But Semley said the needs go far beyond what can be done individually by municipalities.

He said Canadians should look to the United States, which saw their roads were in poor repair two decades ago and established laws that tied a high percentage of fuel taxes directly to road repair.

Federal and provincial governments in Canada have steadfastly refused repeated suggestions by municipal leaders that a large portion of gas taxes should be dedicated to road repair, instead of going into general revenues.

Semley said 84 per cent of all fuel taxes in the U.S. are earmarked for work on the highway system.

Years of government lobbying clearly hasn't been enough and Semley recognizes one problem for the Ontario Road Builders Association is getting its messages across in new ways.

It has started a public education campaign to highlight the safety concerns of road workers in construction zones. The message will be carried in movie trailers across Ontario.

Perhaps the pitch for better roads will be next.

Coming soon to a theatre near you.

"...A potentially disastrous financial situation is developing."

Report for Heavy Construction Association of Regional Niagara