

NIAGARA

Road, water infrastructure needs \$115 million in repairs

Road costs \$47.7 million; sewer, water updates require \$67.7 million

By **KALVIN REID**
 Standard Staff

Niagara's road and water infrastructure needs \$115 million in repairs to bring it up to date, an independent consultant told the Region's public works committee this week.

The news didn't catch any politicians by surprise. But they aren't any closer to figuring out where the money is going to come from.

"This mirrors a report brought to us last year by public works staff," said Thorold Mayor Robin Davidson. "The real problem is we don't have \$100 million to invest.

"There's no surprise. It's nothing we didn't know. But we only have one source of financing and that's the tax base and we're already spread thin."

BDO Dunwoody and Associates was retained by the Heavy Construction Association of Regional Niagara last year to investigate Niagara's infrastructure.

The final report indicated Niagara's roads need about \$47.7 million in repairs.

BDO Dunwoody senior consultant Mark Hudson said delaying costs is a

false economy that costs more in the long run.

"The trend in infrastructure funding for roads is pretty alarming," he said. "The Ontario auditor general has reported that 60 per cent of roads are substandard or poor."

A further \$67.7 million is required to update the water and wastewater system.

"This is not to suggest the system is unsafe," Hudson said. "However, it's worth noting there is funding needed for the system."

The original BDO Dunwoody report was completed last spring, but its release was delayed when the Walkerton tainted-water tragedy broke in May.

The consultants said funding restraints are the typical roadblock to infrastructure improvements.

"Funding is a big issue," said BDO Dunwoody senior vice-president George Barkwell. "The public needs to accept it and be participatory in the solution. We've got to solve this problem together.

"You want to be creative in the funding situation."

The report suggests municipalities seek new ways to generate revenue like a municipal income tax, a municipal gas tax or increased development charges and user fees.

However, some of the suggestions go beyond the taxing power of municipalities and would require co-operation from senior levels of government.

St. Catharines Regional Councillor Brian McMullan said there should be a larger role for the federal and provincial governments to play.

"When you look at the magnitude of the problem, we can't solve it on our own," he said. "We're in a crisis today.

"About 40 per cent of the province's GDP (gross domestic product) moves through our region. That's a provincial problem."

The Region will be taking a closer look at its infrastructure situation, said public works director Ian Neville.

"We're trying to get a grasp on the whole thing," he said. "If you don't have sustainable infrastructure, you don't have a sustainable community.

"It's as simple as that."



"The real problem is we don't have \$100 million to invest."

Robin Davidson
 Thorold mayor