

Thorold's infrastructure among best in Niagara

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THOROLD NEWS

Thorold ranks among the top three municipalities in Niagara Region when it comes to maintaining its sewers, water lines and other infrastructure, a consultant who has studied the infrastructure needs of the region said last week.

George Barkwell, a consultant for BDO Dunwoody & Associates, one of the country's largest municipal auditors, has recently completed a survey of Niagara Region's infrastructure needs, and has come to some sober conclusions for the region and its taxpayers.

Barkwell cautioned Thorold council last week that municipalities across Niagara have to take measures to upgrade their infrastructure in a timely fashion or face costs that will be an "economic detriment" to regional taxpayers down the road.

Compared to other municipalities in Niagara, Thorold has taken more care to upgrade roads and other infrastructure. In its latest annual budget, the city allocated more money to replace such infrastructure as sewer and water lines on a more regular basis.

Barkwell explained that a day of reckoning is coming for all municipal taxpayers because much of the suburban growth in Niagara occurred in the

1950s, 60s and 70s, and the water and sewer lines constructed to service those areas have a life that doesn't stretch far beyond 50 years. On top of that, many roads in the region are in poor shape.

The longer municipalities put off upgrading infrastructure, Barkwell said, the more it will cost taxpayers to either fix or replace it. Those municipalities that don't take action, he warned, are operating in a "false economy" that will come back to haunt them later.

In the case of roads across the region, it could cost an estimated \$47 million to improve them now. But if action isn't soon taken, the cost of upgrading these roads could triple. Between the years 1997 and 2000, said Barkwell, municipalities across the region spent about \$67 million less than it should have to upgrade water and sewer lines.

Efforts must also continue to improve highway transportation between the American border and Hamilton and Toronto. Within the next three to five years alone, said Barkwell, truck traffic through the region could double.

"This is a really critical issue," he said.

Niagara's regional government is working with the province to establish a "mid-peninsula trans-

portation corridor" as an alternate route to the QEW which is becoming more and more congested with traffic, and placing increasing development pressures on surrounding tender fruit-growing lands.

Barkwell said another issue in Niagara that has concerned him has been the relatively low fees compared to other regions in the province that municipalities have charged developers for installing roads and other infrastructure. Development charges should be increased, he said.

The details of the survey Barkwell's firm has conducted in Niagara, including how municipalities rank in terms of maintaining their infrastructure, remain confidential.