

# Infrastructure is essential

*Dan McCaffery - October 2020*

When I was a kid I often heard adults sing the praises of Sarnia Mayor Bill Nelson.

Nelson was the longest serving mayor in the city's history at that time. In fact, he served a dozen years, back in the days when elections were held every two years.

It remains the second best record in history, behind only Mike Bradley, who has been chief magistrate for as long as anyone can remember.

The reason Nelson was so popular was because he kept taxes down. But over time I began hearing complaints about how he had let the city's infrastructure deteriorate. People were especially upset with the condition of Sarnia's roads.

I have no idea whether the complaints were valid. And even if they were, Nelson was by no means the only politician to kick the can down the road, leaving important projects to future leaders, to deal with.

Mayors Henry Ross, Paul Blundy and Andy Brandt were not reckless with the city's funds but they did spend a fair amount on roads, sewers, waterlines and other infrastructure.

But when Marceil Saddy took power the city was extremely cautious. He brought austerity to the council chambers and made it stick. Ever since that time, Sarnia has spent much less on infrastructure than the average Canadian municipality. These days, we only spend about half as much as the average community on such things as road repairs.

Needless to say, decades of low spending eventually caught up to us. Far too many of our roads are in bad shape.

If we continue to ignore them, they will eventually crumble completely.

That's why I support, with a few reservations, council's proposed 2021 capital budget of about \$60 million. It's about twice as much as was approved for 2020, but that's OK with me. If we don't fix our roads now, we'll pay a lot more to repair them in the future. The fact is that infrastructure is essential. More than that, maintaining it creates a lot of work.

I hate to see governments spend money frivolously. In the past we've seen Ottawa squander money on such things as studies into the mating habits of butterflies.

But infrastructure work leaves the taxpayer with something for their money.

Of course there are probably some things that should be cut out of the 2021 proposals. I question why we need upgrades to our arenas at a time when our junior hockey clubs are idle (and despite what people say, I don't think the Legionnaires or Sting will play a single game this winter).

Some projects can be put off a little longer. But most of what's being proposed is not just necessary, it's almost essential.



