

NEWS / TORONTO GTA

Road repairs in the slow lane

City budgets \$173M to repair 420 km of roads and 80 bridges next year, but critics say it's not enough

By BRYN WEESE, SUN MEDIA

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The city's teeth-chattering roads will get worse before they get better, despite the fact that the city is poised to spend \$1.626 billion in 2009 on capital projects.

In fact, Toronto won't begin to make headway on its road repair backlog for another eight years.

The proposed 2009 capital budget was released yesterday, as was a spending plan for the next four years and -- for the first time ever -- a 10-year spending forecast, which will have to survive three municipal elections.

According to Toronto Mayor David Miller, the spending projects being proposed address both the need to repair current infrastructure and future growth.

As for roads -- if the budget is approved by council Dec. 10 -- an additional \$21 million will be spent over and above the \$150 million spent in 2008, which was itself a \$10 million boost from 2007, according to Councillor Glenn De Baeremaeker, who chairs the city's infrastructure committee.

\$173M OUTLAY

In total, \$173 million will be spent in 2009 repairing 420 km of roads, and rehabilitating 80 bridges.

"We will be fixing more potholes, we will be fixing more bridges, and we will be resurfacing more roads," he said. "Things will be getting \$20 million better for taxpayers this year in terms of road repair."

But according to Gary Welsh, the city's general manager of transportation, even with the increased investment, it won't be until 2014 that the backlog begins to shrink. He said that's largely because inflation drives up the cost of the backlog repairs, even though the work remains largely the same.

"The backlog dollar amount is going up, but the number of (backlog repairs) isn't going up significantly," Welsh said.

Councillor Mike Del Grande said the proposed capital budget and the four-year plan is proof the city's spending habits are out of whack.

"The frustration is that the basics continue to take second stage to pet projects," Del Grande said, noting while only \$173 million is being spent on roads this year, \$70 million is being spent on bike lanes over the next four years, and \$100 million to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

Fay Lyons, a spokesman for the Canadian Automobile Association, said the road repair backlog should be the top priority for council and not enough is being spent on the problem.

"The roads are crumbling in the city of Toronto, anyone can see that," she said, noting three of the four worst roads in the province are in Toronto, according to a recent CAA survey.

"Toronto residents, quite frankly, deserve better especially now that they are paying an additional tax."

Lyons thinks more of the \$55 million the city is expected to raise from the vehicle registration tax this year should be earmarked for the road repair backlog, which Welsh said is about \$320 million.

According to the city's chief financial officer, the \$21 million increased investment in road repair in 2009 is a good first step that is allowing them to "stabilize" the backlog.

"But we still need to do more," said Cam Weldon.

\$70M FOR BIKE PLAN

Also among the 2009 to 2014 capital spending projects is \$70 million to complete the bike plan. "It's \$70.290 million over the next five years, that's the cost of 83 km of off-road paths, 410 km of bike lanes, and 122 km of shared roadways," said Mayor David Miller. "Asphalt's expensive."

Lyons supports more cycling in the city, but said \$70 million may be too much now, given the state of the city's roads.

"(The city) needs to focus on improving the roads before they start these (bike lane) projects because how are bikes going to ride efficiently and safely ... on roads that are in poor shape," she asked.