

THE BALLOT BOX QUESTION FOR FALL MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

BY CHRIS LORENC



Chris Lorenc is president of the Manitoba Heavy Construction Association
mhca.mb.ca

What's a mayor to do? As we sit, weeks away from the spring thaw that will trigger construction season, Winnipeg does not know if it will have funding to invest in regional roads at the top of the list for repair. Among these are Portage Avenue, Pembina Highway and Main Street, each needing significant work.

Moreover, what is going to happen to the next leg of the southwest rapid transit route? We've constructed the leg to speed buses from Queen Elizabeth Way to Jubilee Avenue. But the 'corridor' stops there, a stub of the bigger idea, which is to move commuters quickly to and from south Winnipeg.

Rapid transit is the kind of amenity almost universally available in modern, competitive cities. The city has made the decision to proceed. So why are we still in the funding weeds on this?

Winnipeggers should have been dismayed, yet again, to see Mayor Brian Bowman at the steps of the legislature, hat in hand, asking the province to flow the funds for the southwest transit corridor's Phase II, along with almost \$55 million to honour funding agreements made in 2017 for infrastructure shared-costs.

And he was in Ottawa last month, seeking federal help to get the province to approve the flow of dollars from the New Building Canada Fund for Winnipeg's regional road budget. The federal budget, released a week after his visit,

confirmed protracted delays — years, not weeks — are expected before infrastructure funds flow to their intended targets.

So, what is the mayor to do? What is any mayor or reeve in Manitoba or Canada, to do?

There is a painfully common theme to these stories.

No municipality can afford on its own to write large-scale projects into their capital budgets. So Winnipeg, like every municipality, is forced to await the nod from higher levels of government, which may decide to re-negotiate agreements their predecessors signed, or change direction based on fiscal realities they face.

Fair enough, but it's no way to plan strategically for critical investment in transportation infrastructure — systems that move people to jobs and goods to market. These are the arteries of trade that keep the heart of the economy pumping.

Municipal governments, being the legislated creatures of provincial governments, are at the mercy of provincial and federal priorities. Funding transfers from higher levels of governments, which help sustain the budgets of basic services, can and do change. These sometimes unreliable funding relationships were created at the turn of the century; they do not meet the demands upon today's cities and towns.

Municipalities rely too heavily on regressive property taxation to raise revenues, and the results are insufficient to the demands. Progressive taxation would see municipalities raising more revenues from consumption or

income taxes, which grow as the economy does.

Relying on current funding and fiscal arrangements wreaks havoc with long-range service planning, including infrastructure investments, as illustrated by Winnipeg's funding relationship with Manitoba and the delayed flow of dollars from the federal New Building Canada Fund (which also messes with provincial planning).

It's time we re-thought municipal taxation powers, so they can explore new sources of revenue, to alleviate their dependence on property taxation and the political agendas of other governments. Not a blank cheque, but a coherent, transparent, accountable series of revenue streams that rebalance roles, responsibilities and relationships among the government levels, mindful that there is only one taxpayer.

So what, indeed, is a mayor (or a reeve) to do? Good question.

There's no better time than now to explore solutions.

As we move into municipal elections this fall, Manitobans need to hear what incumbents and aspiring candidates would do to engage with the public and senior levels of government to re-visit and re-engineer the wonky relationship and rework the roles and responsibilities between them.

Manitobans should make this the ballot box question for the fall elections. And that's what candidates for the office of mayor and reeve should do, too.



Specializing in

- Asphalt Paving/Concrete Paving
- Site Development
- Sewer & Water Services
- Diamond Grinding



COR Certified



Gold Seal Employer



GOLD SEAL EMPLOYER
EMPLOYEUR SCAU D'OR



PREMIER OF MANITOBA

Legislative Building
Winnipeg, Manitoba CANADA
R3C 0V8

A MESSAGE FROM THE PREMIER

On behalf of all Manitobans, I extend my warmest congratulations to the Manitoba Heavy Construction Association (MHCA) on its 75th anniversary.

A lot has changed in our province over the past 75 years, and members of the MHCA have played a key role in much of that change. Through participation in major infrastructure projects that have enhanced our transportation capacity, improved our access to clean drinking water, treated waste and protected us from flooding, the MHCA and its members have improved the lives of Manitobans and laid the foundation for our province to grow and prosper.

As a province that relies upon exports in order to drive our economy, the importance of well-built, durable infrastructure that is capable of reliably conveying our goods and products to export markets is critical. Manitoba's central location within North America, and its well-developed transportation network, positions us to take advantage of the logistics consolidation that is presently occurring throughout the economy. We would not be in such a strong position if not for the quality of the infrastructure work done by MHCA members over the past 75 years.

Our government is committed to ongoing, stable infrastructure renewal and as we look to the future, we know that we can rely upon members of the Manitoba Heavy Construction Association to continue to create the conditions for future growth and prosperity throughout our province.

Congratulations once again to the MHCA on such an important milestone. I join all Manitobans in wishing your members the very best in the years to come.

Brian W. Pallister

The Honourable Brian Pallister

777 Erin St. Winnipeg, MB R3G 2W2
 Phone: 204-783-7091 | Fax: 204-786-3106
www.mapleleafconstruction.mb.ca