

Taking care of the basics

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Wednesday's (*August 1, 2007*) deadly collapse of the Interstate 35 bridge in Minneapolis -- coupled with last September's fatal collapse of Montreal's Boulevard de la Concorde overpass, and the recent listing of 135 Quebec bridges and overpasses as potentially dangerous -- all serve to highlight the importance of infrastructure rehabilitation.

We realize that the words "infrastructure rehabilitation" aren't exactly attention grabbing. Infrastructure, a category that includes water treatment facilities, roads, bridges and sewers, certainly isn't as politically (or journalistically) sexy as new social programs, global warming schemes or grandiose sports palaces. Yet building and maintaining adequate public infrastructure is a core function of governments, particularly local ones. Politicians should ensure our national infrastructure is in optimal condition before funding another ethno cultural centre or providing more sports rebates for kids.

Besides, proper infrastructure is as important to the national economy as it is to Canadians' safety.

According to Statistics Canada, water treatment plants are the oldest element of our public infrastructure. On average, they exceed nearly two-thirds of their useful lives. "Bridges, the youngest infrastructure, had reached 49% of their useful life," the agency reports. "Roads and highways had reached 59%, and sewer systems 52%."

A staggering 60% of our highways, bridges, interchanges and ports are more than 40 years old. Nearly 30% are over 80 years old. The Boulevard Henri-Bourassa overpass in Montreal, which was closed to truck traffic this week, was built in 1938 and last repaired in 1989.

Nor is the problem confined to Quebec. Last year in Ontario, 187 bridges failed their mandatory safety inspections (although none to the point that they had to be closed). And in Manitoba, 123 are under close surveillance by the highways department because they are 50 years old or more.

In total, Canada's three levels of government own \$160-billion or more in infrastructure. According to the Canadian Council of Professional Engineers, half again as much--at least \$80-billion-- will have to be spent over the next 20 years to raise those structures to modern standards and construct new ones to accommodate booming populations in some parts of the country. Other estimates reach as high as \$125-billion.

The burden for correcting this "infrastructure gap" will fall disproportionately on municipal governments. According to StatsCan, they own nearly 53% of all core infrastructure, compared with 40.8% for the provinces and 6.8% for Ottawa.

Ottawa has a key role to play in this massive rehabilitation project. It can help co-ordinate efforts and assist lower levels of government with funding. It might even want to propose a national highway scheme patterned on America's highly successful interstate system. By one trucking industry estimate, that vast network of superhighways has brought American retail prices down nearly a fifth since 1970, since goods no longer have to be loaded at the manufacturer's site, shipped by train, reloaded onto trucks and unloaded again at the store or warehouse.

Under the Conservatives, Ottawa has already pledged \$30-billion in additional infrastructure spending -- mostly through transfers to the provinces -- over the next decade and a half. That is well and good, but the provinces and municipalities will each need to match that amount if we are to raise these key services to acceptable standards.

If spending elsewhere needs to be cancelled, so be it. Infrastructure is that crucial.

StatsCan estimates that one-fifth of our productivity gains in the past 40 years has been the result of public infrastructure spending. Each dollar invested today -- particularly for roads and bridges -- saves 17 each year in the cost of doing business.

Our standard of living is impacted, too. A significant reason Canada's standard of living jumped ahead by 3% in the 1970s, but only about half as much in the 1980s and 1990s, was the boom in infrastructure spending that began more than three decades ago.

And, as this week's tragic news from Minnesota reminds us, we must be guided by safety concerns, as well. Citizens should not be at risk because their municipal water supply is tainted or because a bridge along their commute gives way.

Aside from protecting national security and defence, there are few functions of government more basic than infrastructure. Our governments need to assign it a higher political priority.

Note: the editorial was published in reaction to the August 1, 2007 collapse of a bridge on Interstate Highway #35 spanning the Mississippi River in Minneapolis, Minn., USA.