

Communication with the public regarding public works, infrastructure, planning priorities.

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Every municipality has a delicate balancing act to perform, managing scarce resources with commitments to residents, while servicing incurred debt and preparing for future infrastructure expenditures.

A typically overlooked element of these tasks is the process of public communication. While there may always be persons dissatisfied (and vocal) about the methods and speed of meeting a municipality's responsibilities, it can be expected that effective public communication can serve to mitigate a difficult government-resident relationship. Everyone wants to have newly paved streets. Most people can understand that municipal governments have limited resources available to them, and that infrastructure development is a years-long process. Some will always find an axe to grind. It is always worth the time and effort to attempt to clarify and inform the general public of these realities and how those who work in the municipality —themselves, residents and taxpayers— share the frustrations about the pace of change and are always working to make things move more quickly and smoothly, given the power available to them.

The cycle of infrastructure development (simplified)

NEED —> PLANNING —> RESOURCES —> TENDER —> BUILD

NEED

Generally, there are two ways that infrastructure projects come into being: the town's representatives decide that 'Project X' is worth pursuing, and they seek approval / support to move ahead with it - like a beautification effort, a community garden, recreation facilities, etc. The other is the constant process of renewing the assets that the Town already has: the water and sewer systems, the streets, buildings and other municipal property that over time must be maintained and/or replaced. The Town of Oxford has an Asset Management Plan to aid with this process. This plan uses the probability of failure and the consequence of failure along with service expectations to determine the priority of each project. This plan estimates the costs involved and gives guidance on the reserve's requirements. This tool is used to help decide which streets require watermain, sewer, storm drains, and pavement replaced and when. As well the plan aids with required repairs to buildings and replacement of equipment. For example, Foundry Street had the most water breaks, causing disruption of water services and staff resources being pulled away to repair those breaks putting other work on the back burner. The condition of the street also helped move it to the top of the list.

PLANNING

No project goes forward without impacting some other part of the community. The income that a municipality receives from property taxes (the big one) and other sources of revenue must be balanced against expenditures: servicing the community's daily needs, paying staff, ongoing

maintenance, etc. And when we look at major infrastructure projects — such as paving the streets — there are two key factors to consider: timing and cost. The *timing* of a project is affected by other projects and conditions. If everyone agrees that Main Street must be paved, before that can take place, we need to ensure there are no other projects that would affect that effort. If the water or sewer infrastructure under the street is old and in need of repair, it would make no sense to pave the street if in the near future it would be dug up to lay new pipes. The average lifespan of a paved road in Cumberland County is 20 years, so frequent re-paving of at least some streets is something that must be planned out years ahead of time, considering all other infrastructure projects that might need to be considered when prioritizing work.

This brings us to *cost*. Particularly in recent years, paving has become enormously expensive, with a kilometre of street costing upwards of \$400 thousand.... and that doesn't include any underground infrastructure that might need to be fixed along the way. As an example, the Foundry Street project, which included laying new water lines and repaving roughly one kilometre of roadway came in at a cool \$1.5 million.

RESOURCES

The Town therefore needs to have enough cash in the bank to pay for these expensive projects. Fortunately, there are cost-sharing deals that can be struck with the provincial and federal governments that make the burden lighter. Even so, Oxford needs to pay its fair share... and that's not a suggestion. The Municipal Governance Act, which dictates what municipal governments can and can't do, requires the town to meet a certain threshold to qualify for “50-cent dollars”; that is, *our fair share*.

Those same regulations prohibit the town from simply going to a bank and obtaining a loan to cover the entire cost of a project. Municipalities can only carry so much debt, and that complex calculation covers not only the current financial picture of income vs. expenses, but the decades-long debt servicing that Oxford must pay for previous infrastructure projects. Fortunately, those past debts are eventually paid off, freeing up cash to build up our *capital reserves* — the bank account where we put our share of those “50-cent dollars.”

TENDER

Here we find another peculiarity of small-town finances. Let's face it: we're “small potatoes.” When a municipality puts out a tender for paving the streets, there are only so many players in the market who will bid on a small project. The smaller the project, the higher the price-per-square-foot becomes. A small paving patch on Water Street last year, about three by four metres, cost us over \$30 thousand. There's not enough profit for the larger paving companies to bring their equipment to rural Oxford for a paving project; they focus on the large provincial highway jobs that allow them to use economies of scale to make the job worth doing. Small towns pay a premium for the work we contract out.

BUILD

So! Finally, we have our ducks in a row, our pennies stashed away, and the winning bidder comes to town to pave our streets. Happy day! But not everyone is happy about *which* street is paved. Why not my street? My potholes are as deep as theirs! This is the challenge to municipal staff, planners and politicians. The Foundry Street project was a priority for Oxford

not only because nearly four decades had passed since it was last paved, but the street was also in particularly bad shape. And the underground infrastructure was worse — leaks in the water system, pressure problems, and a need to not waste precious labour of the public works crew in constantly fixing those leaks pushed Foundry Street to the top of the list. It was also possible due to an unexpected increase in funding from other government levels that enabled the town to afford a project of that magnitude.

Yes, Main Street desperately needs to be fixed. But what you see up top is just one piece of the puzzle. Fortunately, a renegotiation by Nova Scotia municipalities and the provincial government means there is new money available to move some of those paving projects forward on the calendar. When? It depends. Not the answer residents want to hear, but it's the only one available. The financial picture is constantly changing, with prices fluctuating and inter-governmental agreements coming and going.

We ask you to think of it this way: the staff and representatives of the Town of Oxford are also your neighbours. They drive the same streets, walk the same sidewalks, and hit the same potholes. They know there are needs to be addressed. The matter of priorities is something everyone can debate and should in a democratic society. You have a direct line to your town councillors: use it. Express your wishes, discuss your needs, and advocate for the projects you feel are most important. All we ask is that when you publicly take us to task for problems, you also consider the context in which we must operate. We'd pave all the streets tomorrow, fix all the sidewalks, paint all the crosswalks, if it were possible. But just like you need to figure out how to pay your bills each month, we're doing that at a much larger level on your behalf.

Visit us on the web: <https://oxfordns.ca>.

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