

Imagining what Winnipeg could be

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OPINION

THERE'S been talk on Winnipeg's mayoral campaign trail about infrastructure, which is understandable given the deterioration painfully on display this spring with the craters that opened up on our residential and regional streets. Yet some are also saying we can't afford to keep investing in our streets, roads and bridges because the city's overall debt level, sitting at 80 per cent of its annual revenue, is within throwing distance of council's self-imposed 90 per cent limit.

So, what do we do?

Well, first of all, we can't afford not to invest in streets, sidewalks and bike paths, bridges, water and sewer pipes. This is not just about the neglect of maintenance that forces commuters to detour onto side streets, or potholes that bend wheel rims and the cracks on residential streets that are dangerous to cyclists. Our infrastructure is the platform on which our economy moves, getting people to jobs and goods to market.

And without economic growth, there can't be the revenues for governments to fund public services and programs. So, broadly, this is about the kind of city Winnipeggers want it to be and what it should be – a major Canadian metropolis with top-notch core services, and world-class social and cultural amenities that not only draw people here but also make Winnipeggers proud to call it their home.

There's a lot to brag about in this city, but we all know Winnipeg needs work. Work and investment.

Our tree canopy needs serious attention, not just for the next five years but for the foreseeable decades. Our streets are pocked with holes, and the curbs are crumbling. Bus riders, cyclists and pedestrians need to be able to move efficiently, and their travel must be unimpeded in the winter.

Many of our parks, playgrounds and recreational facilities are well past their "best before" service dates.

Streetscaping is a huge issue: the dismal drive from the airport is no longer the only embarrassment; the bookended stretch of Broadway from Memorial Park to The Forks is emblematic of mediocrity and neglect. Broadway should be a point of pride, a magnet for people that is on par with Barcelona's La Rambla.

Does all this sound out of reach?

Winnipeg's northwest and North End need some investment, love and vision. We need to re-envision the built and green infrastructure across those neighborhoods to create an attractive network of streets, parks and paths. Safe, inviting places that don't just move people; they also bring them together.

For example: the planning of a new Arlington Street bridge never contemplated what a \$400-million investment could leverage if vehicles were instead shifted to a wider McPhillips Street underpass and the iconic trestle structure was repurposed exclusively for pedestrians, pedals and parties – as has been done in New York City.

To be clear, the infrastructure burden on Winnipeg – and on all municipalities – is daunting. Adding new investment priorities requires thinking big about sources of revenue, and renegotiating for fairer, better-balanced revenue sharing with higher levels of government.

New revenue sharing agreements can mean allowing municipalities greater taxing authority, such as a municipal sales tax, or a share of the PST.

But fundamentally, this civic election campaign needs a conversation about imagining what Winnipeg could be if we put economic growth at the core of financial and budget planning, to ensure revenues reliably grow to serve our city now and into the future.

In short, city hall needs to adopt an aspirational investment culture.

It needs a chief economic development officer, on par with the chief financial officer. All investment in capital programs should be viewed through the lens of economic growth, to ensure our city grows sustainably in a way that makes the most of its potential.

Then city council has to commit to dedicate revenues to purpose, be disciplined in their application and be held accountable for delivery. The deterioration of our streets and the seemingly endless task of filling potholes are the predictable results of delayed maintenance and straying from the plan that backed an annual, dedicated two per cent tax increase for local and regional streets.

So, let's develop a vision of the city we want, challenge the mayoral candidates to outline fiscal and revenue plans to deliver on promises, hold departments and programs to task, and report on the return on the investments aimed at growing the economy.

And if we did that, just imagine ... where Winnipeg could be.

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