



Building a Better City Isn't Rocket Science – So Why Aren't We Doing It?

I was doing some research on the 2025 city budget the other day, trying to figure out how city council couldn't see the obvious – that our continually growing infrastructure deficit is digging us into a deeper and deeper financial hole.

I mean, it's pretty simple right? We keep laying pipes and building or widening roads to construct or service new suburbs with the help of federal and provincial money and private capital in order to “grow” our city. That, in turn, produces some short term cash for the city in a variety of forms, from permit and utility fees to additional property taxes.

But here's the rub – in return for what looks like growth, our city then promises to take on the long term debt of maintaining and repairing all that new infrastructure.

So, no surprise that as of 2023, Winnipeg had an \$8 billion infrastructure deficit. One which has only grown over the past few years and will keep growing if projects like widening Kenaston and extending Chief Peguis proceed.

According to the city's own numbers, adequately addressing that deficit would require spending a staggering \$800 million, every year, for the next decade - dangerously close to half of the city's current operating and capital budgets of \$2.1 billion.

So pardon me if I'm not impressed with all the fanfare surrounding the mayor's announcement that we'll be spending \$1.1 billion, or roughly \$183 million a year, over six years, on road repair and maintenance.

That won't even put a dent in our infrastructure deficit. It won't even fill every pothole or pay to dig up and repave all the roads that need repair.

Meanwhile, the city's Parks Department has no capital budget to buy additional greenspace, we're cutting community services at Millenium library, decommissioning much loved outdoor pools and spending a pathetic \$1.1 million on services for the homeless.



Windsor Park Outdoor Pool is being decommissioned along with two others.

Not to mention the fact that we still haven't fixed an aging sewer system that continues to belch human waste into our rivers.

Now, none of our councillors are stupid people. Most are well intentioned and some are smart cookies, who have dedicated their working lives to public service. Presumably they *want* to make our lives better and improve our city, not drive it into bankruptcy.

Yet despite their best intentions, that's exactly what they're doing.

So how do we turn this around? Well, take a moment and imagine this. Imagine a council retreat in which every councillor brings to the table a number of measures that would make a very real difference in the livability and climate resiliency of their neighbourhoods.

Imagine not grand, but relatively small things, like investments in better street and park lighting and reduced speed limits to improve safety. Or expanding sidewalks and boulevards on a couple of major arteries to allow for outdoor cafes and trees that shade the routes to local shops. Changes that might also include narrowing residential feeder roads and turning them into one way streets to allow for safe bike paths shaded by trees.

Imagine a city where every house is just a fifteen minute stroll from a park, a grocery store, a doctor's office or a gift shop.



What a better city looks like

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That kind of city isn't impossible to achieve and each of these small changes is proven to result, not in additional debt, but in a return on investment, whether in reduced health care costs, reduced crime or greater climate resiliency.

In fact cities around the world, from Montreal and Barcelona to Singapore and Copenhagen are using this model to build better, people friendly, tree friendly cities that are thriving economically.

The trade-off is this – we need to dump the post war boom model of growth and stop building out, constructing ever more roads and laying ever more pipes and wires to additional suburbs that will only put us even deeper into debt.

Council has taken an important first step toward building a stronger, more livable city by signing on to the Federal government's infill program. But infill needs to be done right, with the right checks and balances and not concentrated in just a few neighbourhoods but in communities across the city.

If we don't, we could wind up with full scale citizen revolts in neighbourhoods like Glenwood, which is already bearing the brunt of too much infill, being done too rapidly.

So, my advice to council and the mayor? If you want your terms in office to really mean something, if you want to leave this city a lasting legacy then stop building the roads and suburbs that only add to our infrastructure deficit.

Start seeing small but essential changes in existing neighbourhoods as the key to building a stronger, people-friendly, climate resilient city.