

Money down the drain

Ontario drinking water leaking out of pipes

As much as a quarter may be gone before reaching taps

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As much as one-quarter of Ontario's treated drinking water – enough to fill 50,000 Olympic-size pools – leaks out of pipes before ever reaching a tap. And that's costing water users at least \$700 million annually, says an engineer who studied the issue for the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario.

Toronto's record is no better than the provincial average, said University of Toronto civil engineering professor Tamer El-Diraby.

"We estimate Toronto – being not so aggressive – to be 25 per cent," El-Diraby said at a news conference yesterday. "The city of Vaughan, which is much newer than Toronto with younger infrastructure, is claiming 10 per cent."

Toronto has 5,000 kilometres of water mains, averaging 54 years old.

"What I'm faulting is the culture – that you build it and don't worry too much about it," he said. "Once they build it, they don't collect data. They don't maintain it, and that's costing us dollars that are wasted down the drain."

Toronto Mayor David Miller, who has come under fire from opposition councillors for requesting only federal funding for new streetcars instead of a slew of projects including sewer and water main repairs, defended the decision to forgo money for water mains.

"We could have asked for all sorts of things," but city council's priority is funding to pay for the purchase of 204 streetcars to replace the aging fleet, Miller said. "Our water system is designed to pay for itself, and we're investing massively in that."

Miller added that the city couldn't use water rate money to buy streetcars, just as "it wouldn't make sense to go to Ottawa and say we want money for water, and not have money for the streetcars."

The conclusion that Toronto's losses are high was vehemently denied by the head of the city's water department, Lou Di Gironimo, who estimates the loss at 9 to 10 per cent, about \$30 million annually.

"That's not bad for a city our size, with the age of our infrastructure," Di Gironimo said, adding that the city responds quickly to leaks. Montreal has higher losses, he said, in part because leaking water disappears into underground rock formations and never bubbles to the surface to alert repair crews.

One reason for lack of data is that 72,000 Toronto customers have no water meter and instead pay a flat rate, said Frank Zechner, of the Greater Toronto Sewer and Watermain Construction Association.

"You know what's going out into the system, but you don't really know what's getting to the customers' taps because not all customers are metered," Zechner said.

Di Gironimo acknowledged the problem, but said the city is rectifying it with a \$220 million, six-year program to replace all meters in the city.

He hotly disputed El-Diraby's contention that Toronto is sitting back, saying city council imposed 9 per cent water rate hikes in each of the past four years to put more money into repairing water mains.

Residents can expect more 9 per cent hikes, if the city sticks with its current long-term plan to raise rates by that amount every year through 2012.