

POLITICS AS USUAL: High Price of Ice

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

The ice storm struck the GTA just over 3 weeks ago and wrought various degrees of devastation on homeowners and residents in numerous communities, not least of which was the sixth largest city on the continent ? Toronto.

However, while the event itself impacted hundreds of thousands of people, its cleanup will impact literally millions. The reason, of course, is off loading of costs onto the taxpayer writ large.

With current cost of cleanup estimates hitting the quarter billion dollar and beyond, the political jockeying has begun in earnest as to who should pay.

It is a municipal election year, so current and potential candidates alike are clamouring to lift the burden of clean up costs from their own communities. While their efforts are appreciated, let's not lose sight of the fact that someone has to pay those costs and that's the taxpayer.

There is no magical pot of money just sitting there waiting to offset the costs, the impacts of natural disasters. There's no such thing as ?the freakishly heavy freezing rain, falling trees, no power? reserve fund on the books of any municipality of which I am aware. No, this is yet another situation where there is widespread damage and no known means to pay for its mitigation.

Thus, given that, as so many of our politicians remind us, there is only one taxpayer, regardless of where the money comes from, the costs will be borne by all taxpayers not just those communities directly affected. Taxes will go up. Hydro rates will go up.

Regardless of where you live. That's the reality.

There is a meeting being held this Friday, January 17 of all the GTA mayors, to discuss and put forward a co-ordinated effort to ask the province to provide the much needed assistance in addressing the clean-up costs. This meeting is being organized by Hazel McCallion, Mayor of Mississauga.

She rightly notes that the communities have a better chance of getting aide from the province if they speak in one voice. A chorus of voices is louder than one ? or worse a cacophony of disparate voices. So I agree with the nonagenarian Mayor. A joint appeal makes the most sense.

As an aside, I hope that senior municipal representatives take her up on her offer and that we see not just Regional representation there, but also individual representation at this meeting. All GTA Mayors ? and thus ALL communities ? should be at the table discussing how best to meet the needs of the communities.

Our needs may all be the same ? clean up the trees, repair the infrastructure etc. But the magnitude of damage is different depending on the community and, frankly, the ability to pay for the clean up too. Thus everyone needs to be at that table to ensure that the agreed upon solution is one that meets to the needs of all communities ? big and small.

Clean-up is, obviously, an immediate need. However, in my opinion what is also needed is a co-ordinated and cross province analysis of what happened.

Why did our electrical grid fail? Yes, ice-laden trees fell down and knocked out wires and transformers. Obviously some people would be affected by downed wires. But why was there such catastrophic system-wide failure? What can be done to prevent this from happening again?

Clearly there are critical vulnerabilities that need to be identified and a plan needs to be put in place to minimize the impacts of disasters in the future.

It must be a co-ordinated plan. As we saw in Aurora, our power supply is dependent upon the supply in other municipalities. We could have the best plan in the world in place in our municipality, but if others don't similarly follow suit, it will be for naught.

Make no mistake, this will happen again. This is Canada. We will have future ice storms. We need to have a better handle on how to protect our vital infrastructures ? water, power, and communications ? unless we want to have another perhaps longer trip back to the ice ages?

Until next week, stay involved, stay informed because, this is, after all, Our Town.