

Taxpayers will either sink or swim with a new Crystal Pool

By Stan Bartlett

Most councillors would be gleeful to get shovels in the ground on a new Crystal Pool and Fitness Centre legacy project during an election year in 2018, although that possibility has set off a flashing amber light for many taxpayers.

Unquestionably this major recreational asset for the region must be replaced, interest rates for borrowing are low but won't stay that way forever, and the province and federal government are flush with infrastructure money. Forgive us though if City of Victoria taxpayers are a little skittish about hastily diving into this project given council's track record with large infrastructure projects.

Council bungled the Blue Bridge replacement, it's overdue and over budget at \$106-million and counting. Taxpayers are on the hook to cover cost overruns, big or small.

The Capital Regional District wasted the better part of \$65-million dithering over the sewer treatment project, of which City taxpayers pay a lion's share including any cost overruns.

The annual tax rate increase for the City of Victoria is chronically well above inflation - has been for years - and will likely continue to be.

So, with neither the final bill for the bridge or sewer treatment system known, how smart is it to add another 3.3 to 4.2 per cent to the tax load amortized over 20 years as predicted in the Crystal Pool Feasibility Study Update (#2) of Feb. 16.

An ignored risk to public safety also sets off a flashing amber light.

A first-class fire hall and emergency response station is critical to service the downtown and core areas and should take priority over recreational needs. Even though a new Crystal Pool should be replaced - as the old

facility is falling apart and costly to maintain - No. 1 Fire Hall should be replaced first.

While preliminary work has begun on this \$30-million infrastructure project, the impact on the taxpayer is unclear after reserves take a major hit. A city staff report a year ago said the debt-reduction reserve with a balance of \$32 million, has sufficient funding for the fire hall and the current debt budget has room to cover repayment costs.

What ever happened to the various suggestions to help moderate costs.

Was a partnership with a developer, who could help pay for a new pool complex in exchange for a space to build condos, ever considered and what were the results? Will there be an opportunity for social housing or a broader multi-purpose or recreation component to the project?

Council voted to replace rather than retrofit or renovate and expand the existing 5,700 square metre Crystal Pool, but were given only one option for replacement. Instead of adding 30 per cent more space, perhaps a more modest facility could be costed.

When amber lights are flashing on a proposed \$68.4-million pool project, it's important to assess all capital project priorities and proceed with caution. Even though a new pool is needed, politicians could minimize the risk by studying more modest plans.

In the spring of 2016 the YMCA/YWCA in Langford opened a 73,000-square-foot complex that includes pool and water features, a branch of the Greater Victoria Public Library, an offshoot of the Victoria Conservatory of Music, and a 6,500-square-foot fitness and workout room - all this for about \$30-million.

Governing is about looking at all options and making a wise choice.

There must be a way to improve decision-making on large infrastructure projects given that many citizens have lost faith in the City's ability to manage and make sound choices with capital funds. A referendum should be considered on all capital projects: Voters can rank their priority and

indicate the amount of tax dollars that should be allocated for each expenditure. Voters would be more engaged and politicians would be given a clear direction.

In our view it would be prudent to delay the \$69.4-million Crystal Pool project a year or two until taxpayers can catch their breath, other priorities are reassessed, and provincial and federal grants are confirmed.

By then, a newly elected council would be in place to see the project to completion and better able to decide if they want to add up to 4.2 per cent to the tax load for 20 years.

Stan Bartlett is the chair of Grumpy Taxpayer\$ of Greater Victoria, a non-profit, unaffiliated, non-partisan, citizen's advocacy group dedicated to lower taxes, less waste, and more accountable municipal government.

BACKGROUND:

City Agenda, committee of the whole, Feb. 16, 2017, Item 5 with three supporting documents linked including #3. Late Presentation (Update #2):

<https://victoria.civicweb.net/filepro/documents/118136?preview=120519>

