

COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS:

An Outcome Statement from the OCSI Infrastructure Forum on Sept. 4, 2014

On September 4, 2014, more than 70 leaders from the municipal and public works sectors in Ontario met in Toronto to discuss challenges in delivering infrastructure services. The Infrastructure Forum 2014, hosted by the Ontario Coalition for Sustainable Infrastructure (OCSI), was an opportunity to hold “courageous conversations” on two important subjects: **service levels** and **sustainable funding**.

Top Five Challenges

Attendees were divided throughout the day into 10 table groups. Each group discussed the challenges facing municipalities in delivering infrastructure (excluding funding from higher tier governments). All tables collectively generated a long list of 25 challenges, and each participant was invited to vote for their own five challenges from this list (*see figure*).

Ranking	Description	Weighted Score
1	Lack of appreciation for infrastructure and value it provides (by end user)	62
2	Zero tolerance for risk limits innovation (risk adverse)	53
3	Full cost recovery and comprehensive long term plans	49
4	Climate change influence on level of service	44
5	Customer/rate payer awareness and education	43
6	Lack of data (infrastructure)	37
7	Improved decision making model	31
8	Decision making collaboration between departments/priority setting	30
9	Lack of communication within corporation & service user/provider	28
10	Meaningful levels of service/targets (metrics) e.g. how	28
11	Politics	26
12	Lack of comprehensive planning	24
13	Lack of planning control	24
14	Making climate change from a global issue to local issue	24
15	Taxation issues (tax aligned to service fees)	21
16	Lack of trust from public (communication)	19
17	Alternative service delivery models (p3, etc.)	19
18	Plan using assumptions that are inaccurate and future is unknown	19
19	Risk management and coordination	18
20	Cost of non-action	15
21	System of governance organization delivery model	13
22	Public understanding/trade offs	13
23	Performance measurements	11
24	How growth is managed	8
25	Once funding allocated how do we prioritize? Right time at right cost?	7

Figure: CHALLENGES FACING MUNICIPALITIES

The overall top five challenges currently faced by municipalities in Ontario are:

1. Lack of appreciation for infrastructure and value it provides (by end user)
2. Zero tolerance for risk by the municipality limits innovation (risk adverse)
3. Full cost recovery and comprehensive long term plans
4. Climate change influence on level of service
5. Customer/rate-payer awareness and education

The Process

The group discussion was punctuated at three different points by provocateurs, who shared their unique insight and challenged participants’ assumptions. They each encouraged participants to dig deeper and make new connections around the themes of affordable levels of service and sustainable funding:

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- Toronto Star urban affairs reporter **Christopher Hume** challenged attendees to think about the language they use when communicating with the general public about infrastructure projects so the public better understands their urgency and importance.
- **Leo Gohier**, formerly with City of Hamilton Public Works, provoked dialogue on the topic of sustainable funding from a public works perspective.
- Formerly with Habitat for Humanity Guelph, **Diane Nelson** spoke from the not-for-profit sector and drew parallels to the municipal infrastructure space.

The first part of the event focused on attendees developing a clear definition of “affordable levels of service.” The following are two sample definitions that were created:

Affordable Levels of Service: (1) The quality of life a community is willing to pay for when presented with the risk and consequences of alternatives. (2) The targets for acceptable service delivery that are sustainable (environment, social, economic, legislative and cultural).

The second part of the event was a conversation about creating a definition of “sustainable funding.” Not surprisingly, there were 10 different definitions, with some overlap to the levels of service discussion. The following are two sample definitions that were created:

Sustainable Funding: (1) Funding needed to optimize the delivery of infrastructure services and account for associated risks at required levels of service over both the short and long term. (2) Funding needed to provide appropriate public services for as long as those services are required, in a transparent and accountable manner.

In the final conversation of the day, each group discussed the challenges facing municipalities in delivering infrastructure, which generated the top five challenges listed above.

A Necessary Exercise

Event facilitator Waterlution worked diligently to ensure the right questions were being asked so that participants developed common understandings of the themes discussed through idea and experience sharing. Waterlution and OCSI ensured participants interacted with delegates from different specialty areas and organizations, which encouraged the intermingling of new ideas and perspectives. Highlighting this, one participant from a municipal engineering department said they had never met with anyone from a finance department and found it interesting to hear their point of view.

Participants applauded the day’s process and outcome. Creating an opportunity for such conversations on infrastructure was appreciated and described as “necessary.” Many municipalities were eager to host similar events in their community.