

Welland ready to take on the future

By: Derek Swartz on behalf of the City of Welland

In about two weeks, Wellanders will see construction begin on the first of four major infrastructure projects that will help the City capitalize in new economic opportunities while at the same time improving the quality of life for residents. The work begins with the reconstruction of Thorold Road. That project will be followed closely by major water servicing and roadway improvements to Centre Street to ready some of the former Atlas Specialty Steels property for next generation advanced manufacturing. Next spring work will begin on an expansion to triple the size of the Rose City Seniors Activity Centre. That will be followed in quick succession by an extensive renovation of the City's two arenas.

All the planned work has Mayor Damian Goulbourne a little apprehensive: in a typical year, any of the four would be the marquee infrastructure project, requiring careful examination of senior City staff. "To have all four happen in one year will be a real stretch of our resources," he says. But he's even more excited that the City will be able to take several major steps toward its renewal.

Federal and provincial stimulus funding were key components to getting the projects off the ground. But just as important was the fact City staff was prepared with several "shovel ready" projects, the Mayor says. In total, the four projects carry a \$21.1 million price tag. City taxpayers will have to fund less than one-third—\$6 million—of the cost.

City Manager, Craig Stirtzinger says receiving funding for four major projects is unprecedented. Because more than two-thirds of the money is coming from recession-fighting programs set up by the provincial and federal governments, the Centre Street project must be completed by March 2010 and the other three by the spring of 2011. "It means City staff will be busy over the next year and a half putting it together," Stirtzinger says.

First up: Thorold Road

By early November at the latest Thorold Road will begin its urban makeover, making it a better drive for motorists and a nicer walk for pedestrians. The project will see the rural-profile road widened to three lanes between South Pelham Road and Prince Charles Drive. Curbs and gutters will be added, and sidewalks will be installed on both sides of the road. New storm sewers go in underground, replacing the decades-old ditches at the road's edge.

The estimated \$6 million, two-phase project, is being funded equally by the City, the provincial and federal governments under the Infrastructure Stimulus Funding program says Sal Iannello, the City's General Manager of Engineering, Public Works and Transportation Services.

There are two other upgrades included in the project. The first is a pedestrian refuge island in the middle of the road at Rose Avenue, providing better pedestrian access to the Northtown Plaza and the Welland extension of the Steve Bauer Trail. The other is the reconfiguration of Clare Avenue, bringing the north and the south sides of the street almost into alignment.

It's an ambitious plan to tackle as winter approaches, says Project Manager David Tsang, Technical Services Supervisor. He expects the underground work will be completed first and the road shaping and a base asphalt coat in place before winter sets in. The road will be open during construction so that the many businesses and professional offices, St. David's Church and Gordon Elementary School can be accessed, Tsang notes.

Next spring the second phase will see improvements made along the stretch from Prince Charles Drive to Niagara Street. That phase of the project is still in the environmental assessment stage, but it will likely include repaving, curb repairs and traffic flow improvements. "This project has been ready to go, but we couldn't do it without the grants," General Manager Iannello says.

Road to recovery

Centre Street gets a much-needed servicing upgrade beginning this fall. This project will provide water and wastewater servicing for individual lots in the Atlas Advanced Manufacturing Industrial Park, making the area feasible for small and medium sized manufacturing companies.

Manager of Economic Development, Dan Degazio stated "Several companies have demonstrated their faith in Welland by investing in the former Atlas facility bringing needed jobs to our citizens. The Federal government has worked with the City and the Welland Development Commission to fully fund two projects, which have the potential to help current companies expand and attract new business to the new Atlas Advanced Manufacturing Park."

That is great news for the City's manufacturing sector. It is also great news for City ratepayers because the entire \$3.1 million budget is coming from the federal government's Community Adjustment Fund Project. "It's 100 percent funded by the federal government," declares Treasurer Bruno Silvestri.

When the property was used by Atlas, there was just one water service line going in. By putting in more than one kilometre each of additional water and wastewater lines on Centre Street between Wallace Avenue and Atlas Avenue, the property can be subdivided, allowing smaller manufacturers to set up shops in the property, bringing more employment opportunities to Welland.

The work ties in with the City's recently announced Intensive Innovation Support

Initiative. The City secured federal funding to locate a technology consultancy in the former Atlas office building. That initiative will help small and medium-sized advanced manufacturers access government financing as well as the manufacturing and research capabilities available at Niagara College.

Like the Thorold Road project, the City has been ready to act on Centre Street for several years. "We were planning to do a portion of it, but we couldn't have done all of it without that funding," Iannello states. The project has a couple of other components. The stretch of Wellington Street north of East Main will be realigned to eliminate its awkward intersection with Atlas Road, and the Brown Road railway crossing will be signalized. Both upgrades will serve to improve traffic flow in the area. All the work will be complete by the end of March 2010.

Welland Community Wellness Project

As the first two infrastructure projects are winding down, another long-sought after project begins. The Welland Community Wellness Project will see a 25,000 square foot (2,300 square metre) renovation of the Rose City Seniors Activity Centre. The expansion will result in an improved facility that will not only continue to meet the needs of today's more active seniors, but will also allow all ages of the community to benefit from other needed services of therapeutic health, wellness and culture.

The renovation will add additional programming space to the centre and a theatre with seating for 400 people. "This theatre will be available to everyone in the City. Wellanders of all ages will now have a facility they can use to bring arts and culture productions to a local stage" said Craig Stirtzinger, City Manager.

Perhaps the most anticipated aspect of the renovation is the health, wellness and abilities component. That portion of the expansion will add a therapeutic pool and hot tub to the centre, as well as a fitness area with training equipment.

"We expect to break ground no later than April 1, 2010, and to be completed by March 31, 2011," says Richard Morwald, Manager of Leisure Services. "It's an aggressive schedule."

The entire project will be LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified, meaning the renovated building will meet strict international guidelines on energy efficiency and for environmentally sustainable building practices. At an estimated price of \$9 million, it is the biggest ticket item in the City's infrastructure projects. Under the Building Canada Fund, it qualifies for matching grants from the federal and provincial governments. Each level of government will contribute \$3 million. The project is open for tender and City staff will review four design submissions by November 17 and make a recommendation to City Council on December 15.

Arenas getting a facelift

The Welland main and youth arenas have long been home to the City's minor hockey, lacrosse and figure skating associations; the Junior B hockey and lacrosse teams and the Welland Skating Club. That home is getting an update that will have the facilities looking and sounding like a 21st century arena complex.

Earlier this year the City qualified for \$2 million from the provincial and federal governments as part of the Recreation Infrastructure Canada Fund. With the City adding another \$1 million to the project, the renovation budget is \$3 million. For that investment the main arena will receive a two-storey glassed-in foyer that will allow passersby on King Street to see the action going on inside. In the foyer, above the ice, fans, friends and family can watch the game in a temperature controlled environment, while enjoying food and refreshments at a new restaurant. The renovated facility will also feature improved accessibility, as well as more community meeting rooms. Players will enjoy enlarged dressing rooms, shower areas and women's change rooms in both arenas.

In the main arena, there will be a new sound system and improvements to the power plant. Despite the glassed-in front, the arena will actually be more energy efficient after the upgrade, Morwald points out. It's an important upgrade to a vital City asset. The City hosts many hockey tournaments and other events throughout the year, bringing visitors from all over the province to these facilities. Then there are the hundreds of minor hockey and lacrosse players, figure skaters and public skaters that regularly use the arenas who will benefit from the improvements. This project will create direct construction jobs and economic spin-off benefits.

Leverage leads to needed investment

The City is accelerating its infrastructure spending as a result of the federal and provincial grants. "It does give us tremendous leverage to do infrastructure work the City needs," Treasurer Silvestri says. The City regularly reviews its long term capital spending plan so that it remains safely within the City Council mandated debt level. That way, City taxpayers are protected against future property tax rate increases.

Mayor Goulbourne notes there are checks and balances built in to the project contracts to ensure there are no surprises. "Council and the community should be confident we'll have these projects done on time and on budget, and the community will be able to reap the benefits of these projects shortly after they're complete."