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Gift that keeps on taking

Election time is upon us and much is at stake.

I would like to suggest that the infrastructure deficit will be one of the main issues.

Maple Ridge Finance Manager Paul Gill tried to warn us earlier this year, in an article, that, “For every ‘burb built, Maple Ridge pays.”

I added my two cents in, that we need to stop suburban sprawl.

Other communities have done the math and realized they can save millions of dollars and significantly reduce their infrastructure deficit by growing smarter.

Why is Maple Ridge council still not talking about this?

Is it because their constituents are still not concerned?

When a new subdivision is built, the developer constructs the roads and sewer and water lines – as well, pays development cost charges to the city for some necessary upgrades to surrounding infrastructure.

DCCs are provincially legislated and can only be used for things like roads, water, sewer, drainage and parks, but not for maintenance of the infrastructure or for things like a new fire hall or added police services and community halls.

RCMP and fire services together make up a 40 per cent of all municipal expenses.

When we approve more, development and another fire hall is needed, we all pay for that. The more spread out and disconnected the development patterns, the more these services cost per household.

About 80 per cent of the cost of infrastructure is in the operational budget. In other words, all taxpayers pay for about 80 per cent of the cost of the infrastructure over its lifetime.

It's nice that we get this gift from the developer, but it's a gift that keeps on taking, from all of us. So it's essential that the long-term cost of any development application is carefully considered.

Right now, the infrastructure items that appear on the municipal books as "assets" are valued at more than \$1.5 billion.

The maintenance cost, as estimated in 2006, when we had about \$1.3 billion worth of infrastructure, was about \$30 million per year.

Are we actually putting aside that money to maintain these assets?

No. We have only been spending roughly one tenth of that.

However, since 2008, a one per cent annual cumulative tax increase is being set aside to start dealing with this infrastructure deficit.

If we keep raising our property taxes in this manner, by 2031 we should have cut our infrastructure deficit in half.

Are taxpayers going to tolerate these cumulative annual increases for the next 20-plus years, and are the increases even keeping up with the infrastructure added during that time?

Under pressure from taxpayers, council already reduced the one per cent increase by half last year and we'll continue to pay a reduced increase over the next few years.

If we don't put enough money aside to pay for maintenance and eventual replacement, the roads start to crumble.

Pay now or pay much more later.

We really need to look at how and where we build in order to control the cost.

Sprawl is costly.

Jackie Chow is a member of the Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows chapter of HUB.