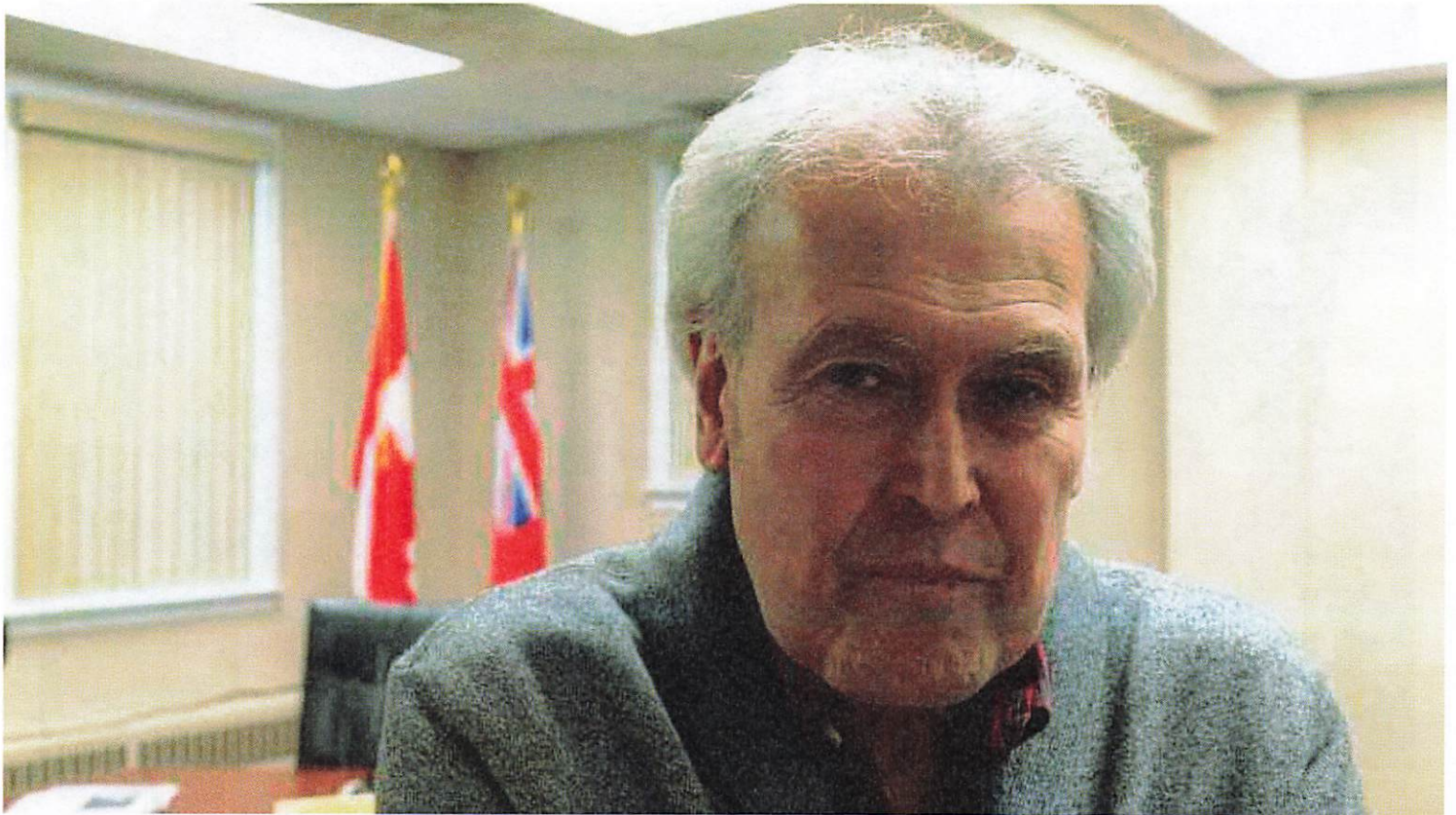


Ottawa

## Provincial neglect risking infrastructure collapse, eastern Ontario mayors warn

Communities say 'insurmountable' costs will lead to bridge closures, maintenance delays

[Dan Taekema](#) · CBC News · Posted: Apr 30, 2024 12:00 PM EDT | Last Updated: 4 hours ago



Tweed Mayor Don DeGenova says without support from the province, his community will have to close several bridges. (Dan Taekema/CBC)



If you want a sense of how the province has left small town Ontario in the lurch, Tweed Mayor Don DeGenova suggests taking a look at the bridge on Lost Channel Road.

The piers of the crossing are cracked and eroded. Great chunks are missing from its sides and there's a hole punched completely through the concrete, offering a view of the rapids below.

The bridge is so dilapidated the municipality's manager of public works said its most recent inspection rated it 19 out of a possible 100, considered "extremely poor."

"The major concern would be collapse," Ryan Reid explained. "We need to fix it now. If we can't come up with the funding, we really only have one choice."



Officials say the Lost Channel Bridge in Tweed, Ont., received a score of 19/100 during its most recent inspection and is at risk of closure. The crossing is shown in this photo from April 25, 2024. (Dan Taekema/CBC)

Replacing the structure will cost more than \$5 million, roughly equal to the entire amount the community along Highway 7 brings in each year by taxing its population



of just over 6,000.

Yet even if they could find the money, repairing one bridge won't fix Tweed's problems, said DeGenova, who became mayor in 2022.

There are six other bridges in similar condition, with similar budget-busting price tags, according to local officials.

While the provincial government trumpets its investments, it's done "diddly-squat" for rural eastern Ontario, according to DeGenova. Upper levels of government are "turning their backs" on the region and it's starting to collapse, he said.

"It can't continue because it's going to be the demise of us."

## **Communities call for provincial support**

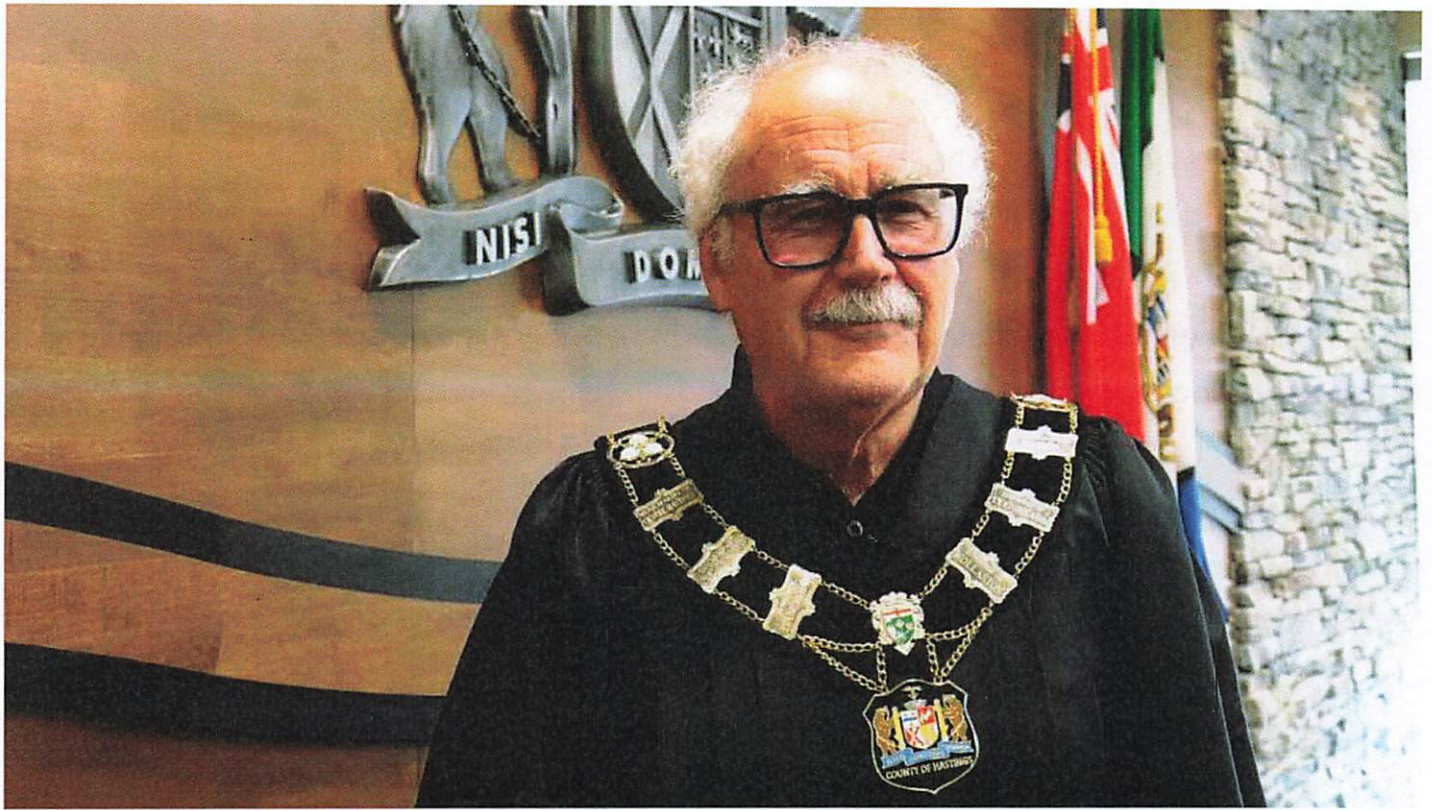
Other leaders in Hastings County — a region of 14 municipalities spread over nearly 160 kilometres between the Bay of Quinte and Algonquin Park — shared similar concerns following a county meeting last week.

They say they're facing double-digit tax increases, depleted reserves and maxed out borrowing limits, all while contemplating bridge closures, delaying road maintenance and putting off repairs to century-old infrastructure.

Several say they're frustrated with the provincial government over a lack of investment, part of a growing sense of abandonment as they see the province [doling out support for larger centres](#) while their needs are seemingly ignored.

Warden Bob Mullin of the Township of Stirling-Rawdon said his community is "confronted by tough decisions."





Hastings County Warden Bob Mullin said communities in the region are facing steep infrastructure costs and need support from upper levels of government. (Dan Taekema/CBC)

They've started renting equipment rather than buying it, dropping load limits on bridges, and are even going to pulverize a hardtop road to turn it back into gravel because that will be easier to maintain.

The township is now contemplating a tax hike in the "lower double digits," he said.

It's a situation that leaves both residents and their leaders unhappy with the state of municipal services, Mullin added.

"We're under strict guidelines [for] road repairs, minimum maintenance standards, and the fact that we can't reach those ... is very worrisome," he said.

## **Fears of closures without funding**

The Municipality of Marmora and Lake has been patching up problems for years, but Mayor Jan O'Neill said it's no longer enough.



"We're at the critical stage," she explained. "In one to five years, we have a number of structures that we either need to close or we need to rebuild them."



A section of the Lost Channel Bridge is so badly damaged a hole offers a view of the rapids below. (Dan Taekema/CBC)

Her community raised taxes by 12.2 per cent this year, but even with the increase, O'Neill said the population of just over 4,000 can't hope to cover the costs headed its way.

"It's an insurmountable amount," she said, adding what's needed instead is a new formula.

The current system requires cash-strapped communities to pay for expensive reports and devote limited staff time to filling out complex applications in hopes of securing funding, "and most often, they're denied," O'Neill said.

**Province says it paid out \$2.5M**



That approach makes planning difficult, according to O'Neill, who said if she and other leaders had a better idea of what support they could expect from upper levels of government, it would help them plan for the long term.

In a statement, a spokesperson for Ontario's Ministry of Infrastructure said it provides formula-based funding to 425 rural municipalities for projects including roads, bridges and wastewater. Communities can save their grant funding for up to five years to cover larger projects.



Ontario Infrastructure Minister Kinga Surma speaks at a news conference in Toronto on April 18, 2023.  
(Heather Waldron/CBC)

The Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund paid out a combined \$2,510,634 to the 14 municipalities that make up Hastings County in 2024, the ministry wrote.

Ontario is also investing \$1 billion in a municipal housing infrastructure program, which will go toward roads and bridges. Hastings County communities will be eligible to apply for that money this summer, so long as those projects will enable housing, according to the statement.



## Like talking to the wall

Of the \$5.5 million Tweed brings in through taxes each year, its mayor says nearly 20 per cent goes to paying Ontario Provincial Police, another 10 per cent goes to insurance and the remaining funds have to be spread across fire services, recreation, 52 bridges and 800 kilometres of road.

“I could have been talking to that wall over there. The lack of empathy, a lack of understanding was so disconcerting that we left in a rage.”

- Tweed Mayor Don DeGenova

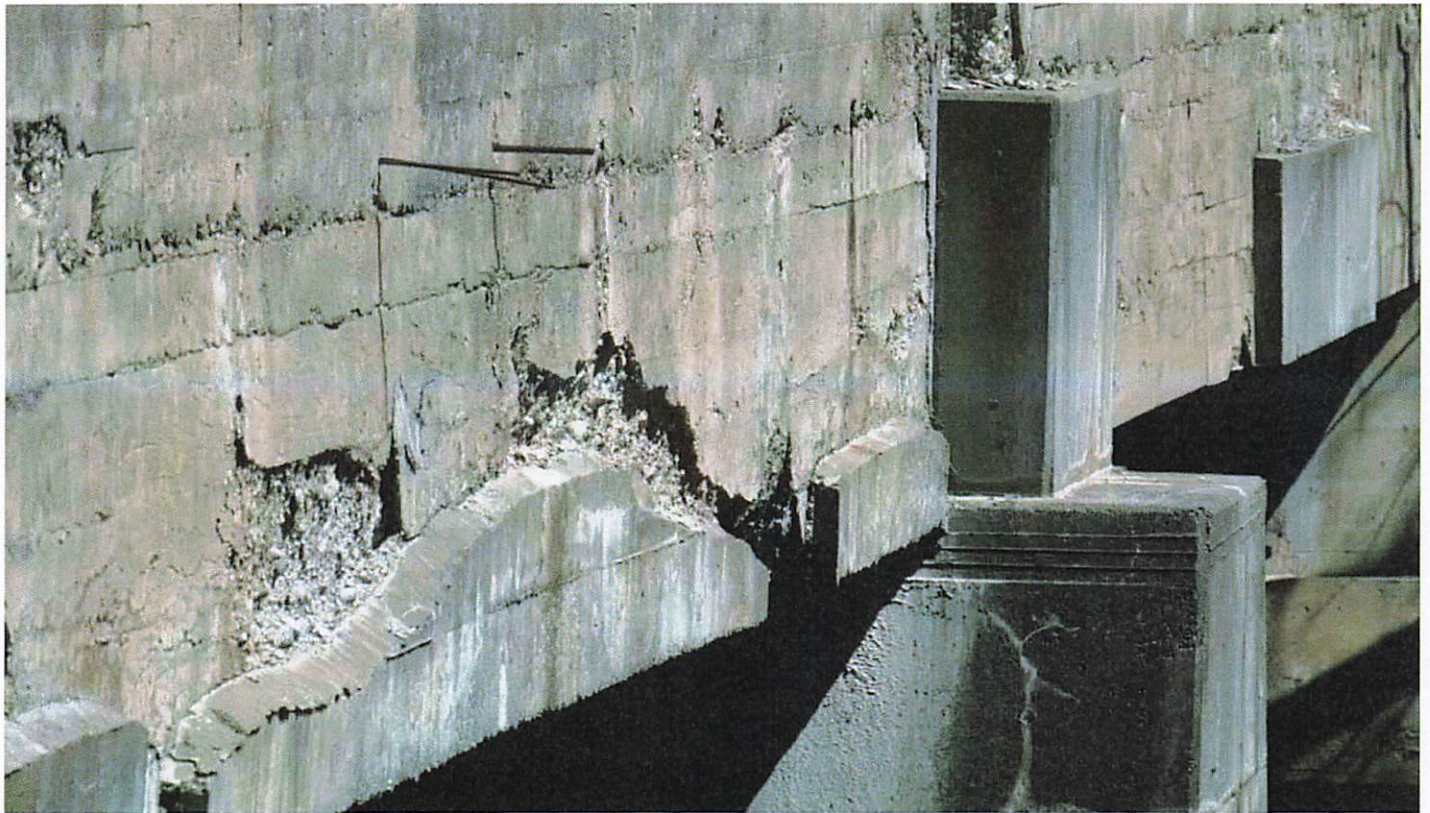
Tweed's council started the 2024 budget cycle staring down a 54.4 per cent tax increase.

After significant cuts, including to all infrastructure projects, that was whittled down to the 17.8 per cent and passed.

Despite the increase, DeGenova said he expects some of the region's bridges will be shut down.

A [report about the Lost Channel Bridge](#) states that would mean detours for residents living in five homes on one side, and another four homes plus an apartment building on the other.





Large chunks are missing from the safety barriers along Lost Channel Bridge in Tweed. Officials say it needs to be replaced or repaired immediately. (Dan Taekema/CBC)

DeGenova said the closure would force school buses to change their routes, and the prospect has also sparked fears about ambulance response times.

The mayor tried to raise his concerns during a meeting with Infrastructure Minister Kinga Surma in January, but said his pleas fell on deaf ears.

"I could have been talking to that wall over there," he said, pointing. "The lack of empathy, a lack of understanding was so disconcerting that we left in a rage.

"People don't want to acknowledge that they have a role and a responsibility to helping small rural Ontario survive."

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