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Dubious honour in the can

Taxpayers group blasts city's rainwater toilets

Dave Bowden, National Post

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The City of Toronto spent nearly \$1-million unwittingly vying for a wasteful spending award, literally flushing the money away, according to the Canadian Taxpayers Federation.

Toronto was a runner-up in the tax watchdog's 11th annual Teddies Waste Awards, a tongue-in-cheek "award" granted to various levels of government for projects the taxpayers federation deems wasteful. The city was nominated for the \$935,000 system installed at Exhibition Place's Automotive Building, which will collect rainwater through a cistern on the roof and use it to flush the building's toilets.

"I feel flattered, actually," Deputy Mayor Joe Pantalone, who oversees the project as chair of the Exhibition Place board of directors, said with a hint of sarcasm.

"If [the taxpayers federation] had been around here about 100 years ago, they would have also criticized when we introduced the first grid street lighting at Exhibition Place in Toronto. They would have thought that was a waste, too."

Mr. Pantalone admitted there are still kinks to work out of the new system, but said he views it as an investment in renewable resources that will pay dividends in the future.

"It's a little expensive now because it's a prototype....

The way you do research and development, you pay a lot of money because you know eventually it's going to pay off," he said.

"They're behind the times.... This [project] is the future and therefore, if the Canadian Taxpayers Federation thinks it's a waste, it augers well for this project."

But Kevin Gaudet, the Ontario director of the taxpayers federation, said nearly \$1-million spent on a toilet-flushing system constitutes money down the drain, not a wise investment.

"[Mr. Pantalone] and a handful of his councillors repeatedly demonstrate that they just don't care a lick about taxpayer money. They'll spend it on anything they want, and no matter how bad it is

a lick about taxpayer money. They'll spend it on anything they want, and no matter how bad it is, they just don't care," he said.

The system will still require water from nearby Lake Ontario from time to time, as Toronto's annual rainwater is neither consistent nor plentiful enough to rely on. The lawn sprinkler system will also continue to use lake water exclusively, prompting Mr. Gaudet to nominate the rainwater collection system.

"Talk about flushing away taxpayers' money -- this is such a beautiful example," he said. "That money could be put to such better use than frivolous projects like this."

With less than \$1-million spent on the rainwater system, Toronto's project couldn't compete with Vancouver, the eventual municipal Teddy winner, which took the top "honour" for its investment in condominiums to be used as the athletes' village at the 2010 Olympics.

The project, originally slated to net the city \$190-million, will now cost it \$875-million.

Mr. Gaudet fears Toronto's current bid to land the 2015 Pan Am Games could render similar results -- and possibly a future Teddy.

"All you need to do is look to Vancouver and British Columbia to see what can happen with a games [bid]," he said. "In Vancouver we're looking at huge, massive overruns [and] there's no reason to believe the Pan Am Games will be any better. Why would it?"

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