

Let's use gas tax cash wisely

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Municipalities far and wide can breathe a little easier today after it was confirmed Monday that federal gas tax funding would be extended permanently.

That allows Durham's eight municipalities, along with the Region, the advantage of being able to budget knowing millions will flow from the feds to our area on an annual basis.

The amount of our federal tax dollars bouncing back to us is not insignificant. Over the last three years Durham's municipalities and the Region received \$32 million in federal money, which was used to help fund the material recovery facility in the Region, improvements to organics collections in Oshawa and other projects.

It's estimated the funding will increase to nearly \$50 million over the next few years. The Region will get \$8.2 million next year and \$16.5 million in 2009-2010. What to do with that windfall is the \$24.7 million question.

Regional Chairman Roger Anderson said he would like to see the cash flow into the proposed energy-from-waste facility, which, if it passes an environmental assessment and gets final approval from council, would be built in Courtice.

However, there may be other options for the money, including but not limited to: using it for needed road repairs or to help offset future Regional tax increases.

Given that the money is essentially guaranteed by the feds, it's important council have a debate over what to use it for. Councillors must make sure residents get the best bang for their tax buck no matter what the source is.

It's tempting to see Mr. Anderson's rationale for funding the EFW facility out of federal gas tax contributions. Such a plan, executed over a number of years, would take the large capital cost expense away from Regional ratepayers and allow Regional councillors the chance to say it won't cost local residents on their property tax bill.

But the incinerator is certainly far from a sure thing and it would be worthwhile to find other smart ways to use the federal dough to improve local infrastructure.