

An unjustifiable use of tax dollars

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On Feb. 10, Quebec City and the province of Quebec announced a plan to split the cost of a new \$400-million NHL-calibre hockey arena. Never mind that Quebec lost its major league hockey team in 1995 -- and has no guarantee of attracting one should this arena be built. Or, that the province has a \$225-billion debt, average emergency room waits of 20 hours and crumbling roadways that on occasion have collapsed and killed people. Apparently hockey is even more of a sacred cow than the province's language laws, and must be supported at all costs.

Canadians outside the province may shake their heads at this folly, but are nonetheless breathing a small sigh of relief. Since Quebec is shouldering the entire tab, it appears Ottawa won't be shovelling tax dollars at this project after all. (Unless you count equalization payments, which go into the province's general revenues, and thus will arguably trickle down to the arena).

Think again. According to Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Josee Verner, the federal government is still in the game. "We'll let them make their announcement but all this shows one thing -- that we're working

in collaboration and we do hope, at the end, to have a business plan," she told reporters the day of the announcement. Once a plan is in place that involves the private sector, apparently, the federal government is prepared to pony up.

Prior to the announcement, Federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty had publicly mused about using gas tax revenues to fund the hockey arena. Never mind that the rules for the federal \$2-billion gas tax infrastructure fund limit its disbursements to projects such as roads, sewers and water treatment systems. These regulations could apparently have been easily amended and included in the next federal budget, expected in March.

Why are the Tories so determined to satisfy Quebec City's demand for a new hockey arena? The answer is crass electoral calculation. There are seven ridings in the area of the provincial capital, five of which are held by Conservatives, two by the Bloc Quebecois. The Tories would like to take all of them, and figure that bribing voters with their own tax money (with some from the rest of the country thrown in) may do the trick.

Understandably, this is not sitting well with a number of people, including the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, who lobbied for years to have part of the federal gas tax dedicated to road repair and maintenance. When the current fund was created by former prime minister Paul Martin, the CTF rejoiced that progress had been made on the issue. The organization also subsequently praised the Harper government for being stricter than its predecessor, in terms of respecting the guidelines for spending the money.

To say that the CTF is disappointed would be an understatement. According to national director Kevin Gaudet, "They should do the right thing and give no public money to arenas or so-called entertainment complexes for non-existent hockey teams. That money is collected from gas taxes; if anything, it should go to roads, bridges and highways."

Mr. Gaudet also points out that the potential recipient for a large chunk of this money -- Quebec -- has far bigger worries than building a new arena: "Quebec has a substantial need for infrastructure investment and they want to divert cash away to build an arena for a non-existent team?"

Indeed, it was only four and a half years ago that the de la Concorde overpass in Laval, Que., collapsed, killing five people and seriously injuring six others. The province is currently rebuilding Montreal's Turcot interchange, a major elevated highway intersection which has seen its concrete ramps patched and shored up repeatedly over the years. Meanwhile, a trip through the city's downtown Ville Marie tunnel reveals a crazy quilt of broken tiles and crumbling masonry.

Add to this strong evidence that publicly financed sports facilities don't yield the returns they claim, and the case for building the

arena gets even colder. Worse yet, it risks turning into another boondoggle like the Toronto SkyDome, which cost taxpayers over \$400-million before being sold to Rogers Communications for a scant \$25-million almost 15 years later.

It is unjustifiable to spend public money on a professional sports arena. Period. It doesn't matter what pot you take it from: municipal, provincial, or federal. There is only one taxpayer, and his or her money is better spent on keeping our roads safe than building skating rinks for pro athletes.

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