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We'll pay for cleaner lakes Poll finds 78% of Ontarians would say OK to higher taxes for a new sewage infrastructure

By **JONATHAN JENKINS**, QUEEN'S PARK BUREAU

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Ontarians are more than willing to pour money down the drain if it's going to help prevent raw sewage from fouling our lakes and rivers, pollster Nik Nanos says.

"In my experience when you ask people if they're willing to pay for more taxes for anything -- the usual default answer is 'No,'" Nanos said.

"Because this is linked to water and our lakes, there's a greater appetite to open the wallets to pay for taxes than for a lot of other things."

The poll of 500 Ontarians conducted August 6-9 found an overwhelming 78% of respondents were willing or somewhat willing to pay more in taxes to build new sewage infrastructure.

Only 19% were unwilling or somewhat unwilling, while 4% were unsure.

Much of the country and many parts of Toronto still operate on an outdated system of combined storm and sanitary sewers, which, during heavy rainfalls, can overflow and carry sewage straight into nearby lakes or rivers.

Nanos said the heavy rain this summer -- which has caused localized flooding -- may well have brought the issue to the top of peoples' minds.

"It also drives to what I say is Ontarians' self-image of themselves," Nanos said.

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"They think of a pristine wilderness and take great pride in how beautiful it is.

"When they see some of the stresses on municipal sewage systems and the dumping of water during storms, it probably makes them quite nervous."

The problem has long been identified but the high cost of refurbishing the sewer system has prevented many municipal governments from jumping in.

"I think for most Ontarians they see this as an incremental process, that there isn't going to be a magic bullet," Nanos said.

"We have to keep this in the context of not only does this happen but there are a lot of beaches that are closed because it's not recommended to swim in them."

The poll, considered accurate within 4.4%, 19 times out of 20, asked the question:

As you may know, many municipalities in Ontario release raw sewage into our lakes and rivers after heavy rains because municipal sewage systems cannot handle the volume of storm water and sanitary sewer water.

Would you be willing, somewhat willing, somewhat unwilling or unwilling to pay more in taxes to help build new sewage infrastructure to make our lakes and rivers cleaner?

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