

# CANADIAN JOURNAL of URBAN RESEARCH

REVUE CANADIENNE de RECHERCHE URBAINE

## BOOK REVIEW

**Bird, Richard M. and Enid Slack, editors.**

*Financing Infrastructure: Who Should Pay?*

Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017

324 pages

ISBN 978-0-7735-5147-3

Canadian municipalities should charge users directly for the infrastructure from which they benefit. This is the central standpoint of *Financing Infrastructure*; a collection of perspectives and case studies which contends that user fees, not intergovernmental transfers or taxes, are the ideal means of financing the building and maintenance of infrastructure. In this volume, editors Bird & Slack endeavor to illustrate how charging user fees will result in the greatest level of transparency, accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness in the municipal provision of goods and services. Although *Financing Infrastructure* begins with the assertion that user fees are the optimal way to finance the building and maintenance of infrastructure, it quickly retreats from this assertion in favour of a more measured position; that there will be instances in which some combination of user fees, taxes and transfers will be most appropriate, and other cases “where user fees cannot be charged,” (p.24, this volume). This more measured position gives way to the production of a moderate, solution-driven introductory text.

The nine chapters of *Financing Infrastructure* are varied in their content and structure. While some chapters draw from international examples, emphasis is on how infrastructure ought to be financed within Canada. The first chapter, authored by editors Bird & Slack (chapter 1: Financing Urban Infrastructure: Should Users Pay?), positions charging user fees as a viable and attractive policy option, particularly within the current context of Canada's infrastructure deficit. This orientation is followed by several chapters that address the role of user fees as they relate to different types of infrastructure within Canada; including water infrastructure in Ontario (chapter 3: Paying for Water in Ontario's Cities: Where Have We Come From and Where Should We Go?), water and transportation in Quebec (chapter 4: Financing Urban Infrastructure: Use of Fees in the Water and Transportation Sectors), and infrastructure associated with various municipal good and services in western Canada (chapter 5: User Charges for Municipal Infrastructure in Western Canada). The following chapters move beyond the borders of Canada; exploring the role of user fees in the provision of good and services associated with infrastructure across different American state and local contexts (chapter 6: The Role of User Charges in Funding the Flow of US Infrastructure Services), and how user fees offer a mechanism to operationalize the polluter-pay principal in Switzerland (chapter 7: Financing Environmental Infrastructures Through Tariffs: The Polluter/User-Pays Principle, Swiss Way). Chapter 8 offers an overview and nuanced discussion of the politics of charging user fees for obtaining goods and services from infrastructure managed through a public-private partnership (chapter 8: The Role of User Fees in Urban Transportation Public-Private Partnerships). The volume concludes with a synopsis of some of the obstacles to implementing more economically rational user-charge policies (chapter 9: Why We Should but Don't Pay the Right Prices for Urban Infrastructure).

*Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, Winter 2018, Volume 27, Issue 2, pages 67-68.

Copyright © 2018 by the Institute of Urban Studies.

All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

ISSN: 2371-0292

The scope of *Financing Infrastructure* is limited to the empirical analysis of past inefficiencies in infrastructure financing. Accordingly, this volume overlooks how Canadian municipalities may finance novel, innovative infrastructure solutions in light of emerging challenges and governance priorities; such as the financing of infrastructure to facilitate adaptation to climate change (e.g. green infrastructure solutions such as green roofs, where benefits accrue at the city scale as a result of micro-scale investment), and population loss (e.g. in rural Canada where a shift towards user fees may be an unjust imposition on a shrinking, elderly population base).

Although the contributors withhold mention of several key issues pertaining to local infrastructure and urban governance, this volume nonetheless offers a thorough and insightful review of the ways in which local governments are financing the building and maintenance of infrastructure. Its greatest strength is its orientation towards practice, and further, in the ability of its contributors to identify areas in which governments can improve their efficiency, accountability and transparency. Indeed, each contributor provides practice-oriented insights, as evidenced by the use of real-world examples and mostly jargon-free language. It would serve as a helpful guide to introduce laypersons to the politics of municipal finance, or as a reference for an introductory university course on urban governance.

Garrett Mombourquette  
SPROUT Lab  
School of Planning  
The University of Waterloo