

# DAILY COMMERCIAL NEWS

## AND CONSTRUCTION RECORD

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Infrastructure stimulus ranks as construction story of year

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It's government infrastructure stimulus by a nose when it comes to Ontario's 2010 "construction story of the year." Government stimulus efforts edged out an expert panel review of Ontario's occupational health and safety system, in a photo finish, to determine the industry's top 2010 newsmaker.

"If it wasn't for the stimulus package there would not have been as much construction during the economic slowdown," said Michael Atkinson, president of the Canadian Construction Association.

"Despite what a lot of people are saying, it came on at just about the perfect time. This was a stimulus program and not an infrastructure program."

Andy Manahan, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, also gave a nod to the infrastructure stimulus as the top newsmaker.

"A lot of the projects got started this year, which really makes it the year of the infrastructure stimulus program," he said.

"Some auditor reports (both federal and provincial) also gave some indication that the federal government and its departments can mobilize and deliver projects in relatively short order."

The Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association (OSWCA) pointed to the recent stimulus extension by the federal government as likely the year's biggest story.

"It changed a lot of things at the municipal level," said Joe Accardi, executive director of OSWCA. "They were worried that they might have to go into their reserves to pay for some of their projects."

What comes after the infrastructure stimulus program is what makes it the story of the year, the Ontario Road Builders' Association (ORBA) says, while crediting governments for their recent infrastructure funding initiatives.

"Those are the kinds of things needed to tackle infrastructure deficits. To lay off now is a bad mistake, the economy could use those good construction jobs that were created," said Rob Bradford, executive director of ORBA. "Going forward, we need something coming behind the infrastructure stimulus."

This continued health of Ontario's construction industry was the story of the year, said Dave McDonald, president of the Merit OpenShop Contractors Association of Ontario.

"Industry players can have disputes about how things are done, but if there is nothing to do, the 'how' doesn't mean much," he said. "The bottom line for all of us is to keep our people working."

For the Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council of Ontario some areas of the province did better than expected job activity-wise, thanks to the stimulus, but getting a major occupational health and safety review launched was the 2010 newsmaker.

"In the end though, workplace safety and prevention was most important," said Pat Dillon, business manager of the Ontario Building Trades. "We kicked off the year, very sadly, with the four workers who lost their lives on Christmas Eve at Kipling Avenue."

The repercussions from the 2009 Christmas Eve swing-stage tragedy drove industry and the public to seek improvements to workplace safety. The expert advisory panel, chaired by Tony Dean, delivered 46 recommendations to improve the system.

"Hopefully, with that report, the objective will be met in moving the yardsticks on prevention," added Dillon.

Alex Lolua, director of government and public relations at the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, said the Dean report and the fallout from the swing stage tragedy were construction's main focus.

"I do not recall the last time both industry and the general public were so impacted by workplace fatalities like those of the swing stage tragedy," he said.

"When people started to demand a real examination of the factors of that accident, it was tense there for awhile."

Improving Ontario's health and safety regime, through initiatives like WSIB reform and the Dean report, have made it top-of-mind for the industry, said Clive Thurston, president of the Ontario General Contractors Association.

"It is the thing that dominated the year, safety and how we will deal with it," he explained. "We spent a lot of time on health and safety and working with the WSIB. Health and safety should be the story of the year every year."

The Council of Ontario Construction Associations (COCA) also pointed to the Dean report as a top construction story. Ian Cunningham, president of COCA, said the focus on health and safety for the industry has been paramount and commended the panel's chairman.

"There are no major surprises in the report because the process was so open. Tony was very transparent and welcoming while meeting with employer and employee groups."