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Transit high priority at Greater Toronto Summit 2011

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An upcoming summit designed to address the pressing growth and economic issues facing Toronto will deal with important construction industry concerns.

Finding ways to advance transit and infrastructure plans and preparing the local labour force for future work are two of the core themes at this year's Greater Toronto Summit 2011 being held on Feb. 10-11 at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre.

There will be 600 to 700 regional leaders from the business, industry, government and not-for-profit sectors participating in the summit, including Andy Manahan, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, along with other construction associations.

Recent federal investments in infrastructure, a new vision for regional transit and the 2015 Pan Am Games are "top of mind for civic leaders and citizens alike," summit organizers say.

The city currently faces transit options such as the four Metrolinx-funded LRT projects that have committed provincial funding and the proposed subway expansion plan of newly elected mayor Rob Ford.

"From an industry perspective, there is work that is on the horizon, with preliminary engineering and design work for current transit plans," explained Manahan. "A major shift in transit mode could result in 18 to 20 months lost. Even with a compromise solution of an LRT underground it may speed up the process, but there will be some lost time."

Summit participants will also explore how a possible change in transit plans will also affect landowners, which directly impacts projected construction work, added Manahan. Toronto's original transit plan Transit City calls for the construction of seven new light rail lines along the streets of seven priority transit corridors, which would eventually be integrated with existing rapid transit, streetcar, and bus routes.

"There are landowners who are relying on the Transit City build, who put in applications for building projects, whether residential or commercial," said Manahan. "A change in

transit plans not only affects them but the city's own plans for building along specific avenues and corridors to accommodate growth.”

On the labour readiness front, summit organizers noted that half of the city's population was born outside Canada and 30 per cent speaks a second language other than French or English. Pre-summit consultations highlighted issues such as immigrant underemployment, expanding diversity practices and ways to better enlist all levels and sizes of private and public entities in creating more effective and inclusive labour markets. Factors such as post-school education and training, investing in the talent pool of the future, revaluing service class jobs and skills upgrading will be discussed.

This is the third summit organized by CivicAction (formerly the Toronto City Summit Alliance).

Throughout the past year, CivicAction has engaged over 1,000 people in working groups, regional roundtable discussions and individual consultations to identify the key issues affecting the region, develop the summit's content and identify potential actions to respond to the challenges.