

Stakeholders laud Ford's cabinet as strong, impressive

Don Wall July 9, 2018



Construction sector stakeholders were universal in their praise for new Ontario Premier Doug Ford's first cabinet, unveiled June 29, with superlatives like "strong," "impressive" and "excellent" used to describe core ministers important to the industry.

Among the notable appointments the Progressive Conservative leader announced were Rod Phillips as minister of the environment, Vic Fedeli as minister of finance, Steve Clark as minister of municipal affairs and housing, Merrilee Fullerton as minister of training, colleges and universities, Monte McNaughton as minister of infrastructure, Laurie Scott as minister of labour, Jim Wilson as minister of economic development, job creation and trade and John Yakabuski as minister of transportation.

Only Fullerton, a medical doctor representing the riding of Kanata-Carleton who was first elected to the legislature in the June 7 election, was an unknown quantity to the stakeholders. Wilson, in contrast, served in former Tory premier Mike Harris' government from 1995 to 2002.

"We think there are some excellent choices here," said Clive Thurston, president of the Ontario General Contractors Association. "Rod, Vic, Monte and John are all well-known and we have worked with them in the past."

“Obviously, some we are excited to work with. Vic, Monte and Laurie are three major ministers we have already reached out to.”

Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association executive director Giovanni Cautillo also expressed enthusiasm for the new premier’s selections, saying, “The Ford starting lineup makes sense,” while David Caplan, COO of the Ontario Road Builders’ Association and a former Liberal cabinet minister, added, “Overall it looks like quite a strong team.”

Richard Lyall, president of the Residential Construction Council of Ontario, said it was a lineup with “no lightweights.”

“Doug Ford was only a one-term city councillor but I think the term common sense does apply here. He said he would be pulling together a cabinet of capable people and that is what he has done.

“You’ve got to have the right people in the right places. You’ve got to have the right team in place. So far in my mind he has done all the right moves.”

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— **Giovanni Cautillo**

Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association

The cabinet has 21 ministers, down from previous premier Kathleen Wynne’s 28.

Andy Manahan, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, said Phillips has a major challenge right off the bat in that a central policy instrument of the previous government, cap and trade, will have to be dismantled.

But Phillips should be up to the job, said Council of Ontario Construction Associations president Ian Cunningham.

Phillips was a “shining star” as former minister of labour Elizabeth Witmer’s chief of staff and is a “superstar” today, Cunningham commented.

McNaughton in infrastructure, Manahan said, is very familiar with the portfolio.

“At age 41, I would expect his energy level and enthusiasm in taking on this file will be very high...he was a municipal politician who knows the AMO (Association of Municipalities of Ontario), so I think he knows his way around Queen’s Park and the AMO and Ontario Good Roads,” said Manahan.

Cunningham similarly said McNaughton “understands our industry” and noted he was a strong supporter of the association’s drive for prompt payment legislation and for the new Construction Act.

Yakabuski is an “experienced small business person” with family members in the construction industry so he knows the sector’s ins and outs, Cunningham said.

Thurston called Yakabuski a “known quantity.”

Scott, Cunningham said, is “smart, engaging and open minded” and “will learn the labour files quickly and easily.”

Caplan noted Scott was a former nurse and said, “One of the things I like, she is a straight shooter. And in that portfolio (labour) you have to have the ability to connect well with a wide variety of business interests and labour interests and that will serve her well.”

Wilson in the economic portfolio, said Caplan, can be abrasive but he’s bright and “nobody should doubt his abilities. He will be a very strong performer.”

Manahan and Caplan both said Clark seemed a good fit in municipal affairs and housing.

“Steve Clark is a good choice,” said Caplan. “He has a strong background and is an excellent communicator. He’ll be really good in that role in municipal affairs. People underestimate it but that has to be one of the most challenging ministries in the government, because the stakeholders are all politicians.”

Commented Manahan, “If you talk to anyone in the municipal sector, I think they would agree with me that he is an excellent choice as a former mayor. He comes from a municipal background...he is a quick study and a likeable guy and is someone who knows the housing file.”

In the end, the key point to remember, Caplan said, is who’s the boss.

“The premier is the 51-per-cent shareholder,” he said. “So if he or she decides a certain direction has to be taken, that’s going to happen.”

Cautillo said, “I don’t think Doug will deviate much from his persona. He is a common sense kind of guy. Let’s do what’s best for everyone, let’s watch our spending, that’s his tactic right off the bat.”

Cabinet Notebook: Where’s OCOT?

TORONTO — Construction sector stakeholders found themselves reading tea leaves to discern possible future policy directions as they pondered the realignment of Ontario’s government ministries under new Premier Doug Ford.

David Frame, director of government relations with the Ontario General Contractors Association (OGCA), reported a note to deputy ministers revealed the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities will take a lead role in the administration of the Ontario College of Trades (OCOT), not the Ministry of Labour.

“What that means is that this government doesn’t view OCOT as a labour relations process, they view it as a training process,” said Frame.

Added OGCA president Clive Thurston, “That is back to their original mandate, which we supported and we still support.”

Even though Ford is from Toronto, he made good on his promise to make the cabinet less Toronto-centric, noted Andy Manahan of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario.

But perhaps Durham Region is the new Toronto, he suggested. Prominent cabinet ministers Christine Elliott, Rod Phillips and Peter Bethlenfalvy are all from the area.

Frame noted there had been discussion that the ministries of infrastructure and transportation might be merged, but it didn’t happen. However, Frame noted, there is only one deputy minister for the two ministries, making policy co-ordination easier.