

Infrastructure commitments absent from Ontario candidate platforms

Angela Gismondi June 1, 2018



KATY FAIRLEY — Construction industry stakeholders are hoping whomever is elected following the June 7 Ontario election will continue to commit to infrastructure spending as well as reduce red tape when it comes to the approvals process for developments and other infrastructure. A previous report stated the time to complete the approvals process in Toronto has more than doubled in the past 10 years.

This is the first of a two-part series examining the priorities of provincial construction organizations, no matter which party comes into power, following the next Ontario election. This article will focus on the stakeholders' desire for government to renew its commitment to infrastructure spending and reduce red tape.

With the provincial election in Ontario on the horizon, construction industry stakeholders agree, it's not about what the party leaders are saying, it's about what they're not saying.

"There is not a lot of talk about infrastructure," said Giovanni Cautillo, executive director of the Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association, a sentiment that was echoed by many industry leaders.

“I just don’t want the government in power to withdraw any monies that are already allocated to infrastructure. Infrastructure drives the economy, it creates jobs, it creates a flow and so the government has to be cognizant of that.”

The 42nd Ontario general election is slated for June 7. Current Liberal party leader and Premier Kathleen Wynne, Progressive Conservative (PC) candidate Doug Ford, New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Andrea Horwath and Mike Schreiner of the Green Party are all vying to be the next leader of the province.

There is a big focus in this election on social spending and that could impact infrastructure, noted David Frame, director of government relations for the Ontario General Contractors Association.

“Our number one ask is to confirm an ongoing commitment to infrastructure investment from the new government and the reason is this: the financial situation of the province is not good. In fact it’s a lot worse than what you are hearing about on the campaign,” Frame commented.

“Likely we will get a new government, either an NDP or a PC government, and they will go in, they will look at the books and I promise what they will say is we didn’t know how bad it was and we cannot afford all these promises in the budget.”

“The easy cuts to make are in infrastructure spending. There is \$13 billion on the books for the current fiscal plan and it would be very easy for a new government to come in and say we’re going to trim a big portion of that. We’re hearing the right things from all the parties on this, the problem is when the stark reality of the situation is upon a new government. We are concerned that we might hear something a little different,” said Frame.

The amount of hoops we have to jump through to get anything done is ridiculous

— **Giovanni Cautillo**

Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association

Sean Reid, vice-president of development and member relations for the Progressive Contractors Association of Canada (PCA), said one of the priorities for his members is that the next government put a much stronger focus on fairness for taxpayers and workers when it comes to infrastructure spending. The PCA has been advocating for changes to labour laws that prevent some contractors from bidding and working on municipal construction projects.

“We’ve seen overall a good commitment to infrastructure renewal from past governments in recent years and we would obviously like that to continue, but there are clear problems when it comes to ensuring fairness for taxpayers and workers in our infrastructure system in Ontario. We are counting on the next government to really step up and address some of those concerns,” said Reid.

Andy Manahan, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, said the party leaders seem to be making politically motivated decisions which is not the best way to fund infrastructure.

“The most recent example is the gas tax,” explained Manahan. “The Tories want to drop it (gas prices) by 10 cents. When I first saw Doug Ford’s comment I said ‘oh no, municipalities rely on gas tax transfers for local infrastructure projects...I’m sure they didn’t think this one through all the way.’ They’re trying to appease voters in a pocketbook way, but if we don’t get important infrastructure built at the local level what does that mean?”

Reducing red tape was also among the priorities mentioned by association heads.

“The amount of hoops we have to jump through to get anything done is ridiculous,” Cautillo commented. “Municipal Class Environmental Assessment is one small example. It keeps getting longer instead of shorter...it’s the red tape, it’s the bureaucracy, getting things permitted and signed and approved in a timely fashion as opposed to this lethargic way that everything is being done.”

In terms of the housing situation, Manahan said there are more efficient ways to deliver more mixed-use and medium density developments.

“It’s severe in Toronto but we’re also seeing it in other markets like Ottawa, Kitchener-Waterloo and Hamilton where younger people who are starting out and families are getting priced out of Toronto if they want ground-oriented housing,” said Manahan, adding the Residential Construction Council of Ontario has been looking at ways to streamline the process.

“They have been working with academic institutions like U of T and Ryerson to expedite the process rather than getting bogged down in red tape.”