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Infrastructure

Public awareness of Ontario's infrastructure issues grows

Bridge collapses in 2007 were catalysts, says Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario

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The critical state of Ontario's infrastructure and its future reached more people in 2007 than it ever has before, a construction industry official says.

"As an industry construction has always had a focus on infrastructure but I think this year there has been a change across society," says Andy Manahan, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO). "It is not just something agencies and the industry were talking about and it has now filtered down to the level of the average commuter stuck in traffic."

The Minneapolis bridge collapse, the report on Laval's de la Concorde overpass collapse and the recent 18 Mile River Bridge collapse in Bruce County were disasters that proved to be catalysts in getting people to think about the roads and bridges they drive on, says Manahan.

"It was an unfortunate way to drive the message but more people do recognize it as an issue."

An RCCAO study of the state of Ontario's municipal bridges also made waves in 2007, bringing more attention to the infrastructure issue. The report stated Ontario municipal bridges need at least \$2 billion over the next five years in rehabilitation cash alone to help avoid a tragic failure.

The study also found there is no single provincial agency responsible to ensure that Ontario's estimated 12,000 municipal bridges are inspected every two years as required under the Public Transportation and Highway Improvement Act. Also, there is no central hub for municipal bridge information and uniform records have not been kept since 1997.

The study encourages the province to establish a provincial body that will: oversee and enforce bi-annual inspections of all bridges; maintain a central inventory of bridges and collect standardized data on their condition; prepare a comprehensive report which identifies the most urgent repair needs; create a multi-year funding program and ensure proper accreditation of individuals performing bridge inspections.

The RCCAO will meet Jim Bradley, Ontario's transportation minister and David Caplan, Ontario's public infrastructure renewal minister on Jan. 23, 2008 to discuss the report's findings and recommendations.

"We have had meetings like this before and we believe you have to break down those [government] silos on some of these issues and get people to work together," adds Manahan.

The Infrastructure Investment Coalition, which is comprised of the RCCAO, Labourers' International Union of North America Local 183, Greater Toronto Sewer and Watermain Contractors Association and the Building Industry and Land Development Association, will meet with Jim Flaherty, federal finance minister, on Dec. 31.

"We would like to talk him about strategic investment of federal money and that we hopefully can see the transition of announced money into shovels in the ground," says Manahan.