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Politics

Ontario construction industry pushes for a single ministry for infrastructure

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With an expected cabinet shuffle at Queen's Park in the new year, Ontario construction industry stakeholders have pushed for a single ministry responsible for infrastructure.

"It is an opportunity to consider whether the experiment with a combined energy and infrastructure ministry should be continued," says Andy Manahan, executive director, Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO). "We feel that in light of ongoing stimulus spending and catching up on infrastructure priorities that we need someone to be a dedicated infrastructure minister."

Premier Dalton McGuinty created the combined infrastructure and energy ministry in June 2008 and placed George Smitherman at its helm. Smitherman resigned from this post in to run for mayor of Toronto in the 2010 municipal elections.

Manahan says Smitherman did a good job but it was "formidable task" to deal with all the issues the energy and infrastructure portfolios came with. RCCAO states in a letter to McGuinty that "it was clear to us" that energy issues absorbed a majority of attention and infrastructure received "less focus than it deserved" because they were grouped together, despite efforts to address them equally.

Clive Thurston, president, Ontario General Contractors Association, says the division of attention between the two files was inevitable because energy and infrastructure, though somewhat similar, are both complex and different industries. Also, with the combined ministry, the province's construction advisory council was also eliminated, reducing chances for industry consultation and feedback.

"The infrastructure file is definitely a standalone file," says Thurston. "It is as large and equal in importance as the energy file in our opinion ... and infrastructure lost some of its prominence."

The provincial energy sector will remain an active portfolio with the continued implementation of the Green Energy Act and a pending decision on nuclear procurement, note industry stakeholders.

A sole infrastructure ministry would also be better equipped to address issues of infrastructure deficits in the province and long term planning, says Thurston.

"The resurrection of our infrastructure will not happen overnight and we know it has been neglected for so long," he says. "If we are really serious about the long-term investment to correct these problems and getting the best bang for the buck, the infrastructure ministry should stand alone and be working with the industry as it once did."

The Council of Ontario Construction Associations (COCA) is also among construction industry representatives calling for a sole ministry responsible for infrastructure. The need for focused attention on the province's infrastructure needs is important, it says.

“We are hopeful that Premier McGuinty will see the wisdom of splitting infrastructure and energy into two,” says Ian Cunningham, president, COCA. “The whole industry would like to see that and for it to be considered.”