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Time and money are growing concern for EA process, report says

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Ontario's environmental assessment process for municipal infrastructure was an expensive proposition in both time and money three years ago - and it's only gotten worse, a damning report released Tuesdays says.

According to the **Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario** report, the it now takes 26 months to prepare an environmental assessment for municipal projects, up from 19 months, while the average cost more than tripled to \$386,500 from \$113,300.

"I wasn't expecting it," says environmental lawyer **Frank Zechner**, who wrote the report for the alliance. "My expectation was if we were looking at 19 months before, maybe we'd be at 18 or 17 months now."

Zechner expected to see an improvement instead of the deterioration in part because the **RCCAO** has been drawing attention to the issue since 2009, [when a report from MMM Group Ltd.](#) warned the provincially mandated municipal EA process was making it impossible for towns and cities to apply for federal infrastructure stimulus funding.

Ottawa's funding conditions - most importantly, that money be spent on infrastructure that wouldn't otherwise be built - meant that cities couldn't apply for funding for projects they'd already begun the EA process for.

For most provinces, this wasn't a problem. For cities in Ontario, however, it proved to be a major obstacle. "In Ontario, most projects, however desirable they were, couldn't get their EAs done in time to make the federal deadline for funding," Zechner says.

The RCCAO report makes several recommendations to streamline the EA process for municipal-class infrastructure, which can cover anything from bike trails to major sewers to road expansions.

The report recommends fast-tracking certain types of projects with 120-day deadlines for "schedule B" projects (which would include new, but relatively minor projects) and 12-18 month deadlines for "schedule C" projects (which would include major infrastructure). "Class A" projects are primarily replacing or maintaining existing infrastructure.

The report also recommends the government reduce the use of part II orders, which allow individuals to request a more stringent hearing.

Paul Knowles, a committee chair with Ontario Municipal Engineers Association, said fixing the municipal EA process will take more than changes to provincial rules - municipalities will have to take control of a system that allows everyone from consultants to councillors to grow the costs of a project.

"It's a combination, I suspect, of consultants selling more services, the review agencies asking for more and more, and proponents themselves," said Knowles. "A lot of the cost of the extra work, especially in large municipalities, is internal to that organization. It's the ward politician who's receiving pressure from groups about projects in their neighbourhood."

Knowles said there's no consensus on what a pared-down EA process would look like, but the OMEA will be [holding a workshop in April](#) to talk about what municipalities can do to control costs.

According to Zechner's report, the GTA has seen the most expensive environmental assessments, and the lengthiest. He said it's not a result of the large transit projects across the region (which aren't covered by the same section of the law, anyway) but more likely simply because infrastructure projects in the GTA are more likely to attract local attention and opposition.

"There's that many more back yards, and people who don't want this in their backyards make it an issue," Zechner said.