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Infrastructure

Canada's infrastructure needs planning and vision

Federal government spends fewer dollars than ever before, says
Statistics Canada report

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Canada's infrastructure deficit needs to be tackled not by quick-fix programs and realigned responsibilities but with vision and a plan, states a structural engineering and rehabilitation expert.

"We are in a royal mess right now. We need to accept it and move forward to a solution," says Saeed Mirza, McGill University civil engineering and applied mechanics professor.

"We need to get away from this approach of 'design, build and forget'."



Saeed Mirza

Governments and civil engineers need to start looking at the entire life cycle of infrastructure. Planning for the maintenance of a structure is a must instead of throwing out maintenance costs at budget crunch time, says Mirza.

The damage caused by deferred maintenance of infrastructure by various governments has taken its toll.

In 1995, Canada's infrastructure deficit sat at \$100 billion. Sustainable infrastructure must come with a maintenance manual, just like a car, in order for major damage and repairs to be avoided, explains Mirza.

"The situation is unacceptable right now. When you do not maintain a structure, its lifespan decreases," says Mirza.

A national infrastructure policy, developed by all levels of Canadian government, is imperative to properly tackle Canada's deteriorating infrastructure.

Shifting responsibilities from one government to another and alternative funding models, such as P3s, are not enough, adds Mirza.

A majority of Canadian municipalities are now left tending to the infrastructure built during the "infrastructure glory years" 30 years ago, a recent Statistics Canada report states.

"Over time, capital investment in every region has shifted from the federal to provincial and especially to municipal governments. In some regions, provincial governments took the lead in spending, while in others it was municipal governments," the report states.

From Roads to Rinks: Government Spending on Infrastructure in Canada, 1961 to 2005, reviews and analyzes government infrastructure investment by different levels of government and type of asset by region.

The report indicates Canadian municipalities are now responsible for 58 per cent of government infrastructure capital in 2005 as opposed to 30 per cent in 1961. Provincial governments were responsible for 30 per cent in 2005 compared to 38 per cent in 1961. The Federal government's share dropped to 12 per cent in 2005 compared to 33 per cent in 1961.

"Municipalities in particular, have taken the brunt of downloading from provincial and federal governments," says Andy Manahan, Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario executive director. "This report reinforces what we have been saying. The 1960s and 1970s were the glory years but building has not kept up with the population growth of late."

The study notes Ontario's infrastructure spending increased considerably beginning in 2000. Infrastructure spending rose in most areas, led by roads, water supply, recreational and office towers.

"This positive up tick, however, is based on the fact that infrastructure spending was curtailed in the 1990s as a result of high budget deficits and a slowdown in economic growth)," notes Manahan.

Since 2000, governments have increased their infrastructure capital more than at any time since the 1960s and 1970, the report finds.

However, the growth “has not been strong enough to prevent more and more signs of wear in our infrastructure”. This deterioration is due to cuts in the 1990s when governments were grappled with budget deficits as infrastructure assets reached the end of their life span.