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Ontario party leaders sidestep infrastructure and construction issues

Bradford 'disappointed' as McGuinty, Tory fail to offer detailed plans

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Ninety minutes of sparring, posturing and counterpunching, during the recent provincial party leaders debate, never placed construction and infrastructure issues in the ring, note various industry stakeholders.

"With the debate and the time frame presented it can be difficult for issues to get discussed.

It went pretty much as expected," says Andy Manahan, Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario executive director.

"It would have been nice to hear that construction helped build Ontario out of previous predicaments. A tip of the hat to construction would have been nice to hear."

Premier Dalton McGuinty, Tory leader John Tory and NDP leader Howard Hampton recently engaged in the only televised debate before the Oct. 10 provincial election.

The leaders covered various issues from health care to education but little was discussed about the state of Ontario's infrastructure and the construction industry's concerns.

The Liberals have promised to invest \$60 billion over 10 years for public transportation, roads, bridges, and water systems.

If elected, the Tories propose approximately two cents of the gas tax (\$300 million) would go to support roads and bridges in rural and northern municipalities. A further \$800 million in gas tax money would go to municipal and regional transit annually.

The NDP would upload 50 per cent of the operating costs of transit and build more light rail if elected.

David Frame, Council of Ontario Construction Associations (COCA) president, agrees the

debate went as expected and that Ontario is a big province with many issues.

"I am not surprised or disappointed (that construction issues were not discussed during the debate)," says Frame. "About 90 per cent of the people watching debates are already committed. It is the perception that comes from these debates. It becomes a matter of, 'Who do you want to lead you?'"

COCA has sent correspondence to all three parties raising a variety of issues including waste capacity crunch, commitments to water system sustainability and infrastructure and support of recruitment and training of skilled workers.

The association has still not heard back from any party, but Frame says COCA will ensure they receive responses.

Frame notes that the Liberal and Tory plans for infrastructure are similar and that he still has not heard enough from the NDP about their plan.

The debate's momentary discussions on transit and the plight of municipalities, still struggling from past services downloading, were encouraging, says Rob Bradford, Ontario Road Builders Association executive director.

"It was good to hear how they would address downloading," says Bradford. "However, I was looking for them to be a little more in depth and talk more directly than they did about infrastructure. I am little disappointed the whole issue did not appear on their radar during the debate."

Regardless of which party wins this election, Manahan says the Infrastructure Investment Coalition's (IIC) long term goal for streamlining how many ministries the construction industry deals with at Queen's Park will be a priority.

"We report to at least seven different ministries, we would like to see that consolidated," explains Manahan. "If there was a single body, it would minimize duplication."

The RCCAO is a member of IIC, which also includes Labourers' International Union of North America, Greater Toronto Sewer and Watermain Contractors Association and the Building Industry and Land Development Association.

The coalition considers road, water, sewer and transit infrastructure as core infrastructure which needs to be addressed in Ontario's infrastructure debt.

