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Ontario Budget Reaction

Ontario budget leaves water and wastewater 'high and dry,' Surplis says

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Ontario's additional \$1 billion in infrastructure funding will help tackle core municipal infrastructure such as roads and bridges but leaves water infrastructure high and dry, say some construction industry officials.

"We are pleased with all the money getting spent on infrastructure but we are a bit surprised there was not a single penny for water and wastewater," says David Surplis, acting president of the Council of Ontario Construction Associations (COCA).

The \$1 billion investment announced in last week's provincial budget includes \$400 million for roads and bridges outside of Toronto, \$497 million for public transit projects in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton areas and \$100 million for much-needed capital improvements to social housing stock.

The funding is expected to translate into 10,000 additional construction jobs.

COCA states the \$1 billion commitment of new funds for infrastructure is "a significant step" to tackle Ontario's infrastructure needs.

With no funding directly earmarked to help erase Ontario's water infrastructure deficit, estimated at \$18 billion, Frank Zechner, executive director of the Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association, says sewer and watermain infrastructure needs will need to be addressed through the \$450 million Municipal Infrastructure Investment Initiative. Regulations to ensure full-cost pricing, mandatory metering and dedicated reserves must also be enacted, adds Zechner.

"Reducing our water infrastructure deficit and restoring the safety and reliability of our sewer and watermain systems will require consistent efforts by all stakeholders over many years," he

said. "This budget underscores the need for Ontario to move towards multi-year predictable and sustainable funding, which will help to stretch our limited water infrastructure dollars."

The fact that \$1 billion was directed to municipal infrastructure funding was seen as a positive step by Rob Bradford, executive director of the Ontario Road Builders' Association.

"It was good to see (government) paying attention to municipal infrastructure needs," Bradford said.

"I think we would all like to see them get more long-term funding."

Sustainable and reliable funding and planning for core infrastructure is needed as public transit, roads, bridges, water and sewer systems reach or pass their life expectancies, states the Infrastructure Investment Coalition (IIC). The longer repairs and replacement are delayed, the more expensive repair bills become.

"Everyday, we witness increasingly frequent infrastructure failures across the province such as severe road closures and burst mains," says Andy Manahan, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario and ICC member.

"The lack of new infrastructure is impeding the growth and economic development of our province, threatening the very backbone of our economy."