

Building Trades slam Ontario budget's training plan

Don Wall April 17, 2019



Construction stakeholders are unanimous in their praise for infrastructure spending pledges in the Ontario budget unveiled April 11 but a sharp divide has emerged over the Doug Ford government's approach to skills training with the provincial building trades council saying it rejects an elemental component of the plan.

Finance Minister Vic Fedeli's first budget indicated the government intends to spend \$144 billion over the next decade on infrastructure, with \$66.7 billion allocated for transit and \$22.1 billion for highway infrastructure.

Specifics included a \$28.5-billion plan for new transit in Toronto, a Health Capital Investment of \$17 billion over the next 10 years for hospitals and a pledge of \$13 billion in capital grants over 10 years to build new schools.

"It's a good, steady budget," said Clive Thurston, president of the Ontario General Contractors Association. "It doesn't try to do too much too quickly."

“There is new infrastructure in the budget, and to our mind is it a realistic budget. We see this as a continuation of sound investment.”

Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council of Ontario business manager Patrick Dillon joined other stakeholders in praising the infrastructure pledges but issued a warning on the skills training package. The council includes 12 member unions with 150,000 workers.

“We have mixed emotions,” said Dillon.

“The investment in transit and infrastructure, we think that is great, it is continuing on with building the province which we think is the right thing to do and creates opportunities for training the future workforce.

“However, we have real reservations whether we are going to have a future workforce because we are having very little or no success in consultation around trades training.”

The Ford government, said Dillon, is “listening to people who are not renowned for legitimate trades training.”

The skills training initiative announced by Fedeli included the promise of a new governance framework for training to replace the Ontario College of Trades, the encouragement of employer participation in the apprenticeship system through a new financial incentive program and promotion of the skilled trades as a “pathway choice” for all students from kindergarten to Grade 12.

This government appears committed to making real transformation in the skilled trades sector

— Sean Reid

Progressive Contractors Association of Canada

Dillon seized on the budget’s mention of training and trades certification through the “skill set” approach previously taken in British Columbia, which, he said, was “100 per cent negative for trades training,” and said if the government does not show a willingness to include the unionized building trades in training and other reforms in the next year, his council would be unable to support reforms.

“We are offering to work with the government through those consultations,” he said.

“But if the government is going to work to undermine the system that we have, the intent of the building trades’ legitimate trades training system will be to continue on the path we’re on and to improve that system.”

Patrick McManus, chair of the Ontario Skilled Trades Alliance, had opposing views, saying promotion of the skilled trades had “stalled” during the past decade during the College of Trades era and the Ford government’s announced approach would reverse that.

“I think the wording is quite fantastic,” he said.

“The fact that they are looking at modular, stackable training for the trades, that is a very important advancement...rather than having people go through a 9,000-hour apprenticeship to be a carpenter you can go through a modular course to be a trim carpenter and have a great job and great career in construction focused on a specialty area.”

Thurston and Sean Reid, Ontario regional director and vice-president of the Progressive Contractors Association of Canada, also supported the new direction on skills training.

Thurston commented, “We are very pleased with the training and education parts of the budget...We have been talking about what follows after the College of Trades, and this lays out concrete steps which we are very supportive of, and look forward to working with.”

“The skilled trades vision outlined in the budget was a highlight for us and our membership,” said Reid.

“Make no mistake, this government appears committed to making real transformation in the skilled trades sector.”

The Council of Ontario Construction Associations (COCA), the **Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario and the Residential Construction Council of Ontario** all issued statements expressing satisfaction that previous infrastructure spending projections remained more or less intact amidst cuts to other ministry budgets.

COCA president Ian Cunningham commented, “Overall, COCA was very pleased with the Ford government’s first budget.

“While we were disappointed that it did not include the promised corporate tax cut, there were many other features that we were happy with. These included the government’s commitment to infrastructure, its plans for a new skilled trades and apprenticeship system and the accelerated write-offs for capital and equipment.”

Constructors weigh in on transit-oriented developments and more

TORONTO — Construction stakeholders critiqued Ontario’s Budget 2019 in statements and interviews:

On commitments to source water protection, Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association executive director Giovanni Cautillo said, “Unmonitored and under-reported sewage overflows into public watercourses is a serious problem across the province. It is great to see the Ford government is committed to gaining a better understanding of this problem and working to keep the public informed of when sewage overflows occur.”

On the government's plans for a "new kind of partnership" with the private sector to undertake transit-oriented projects such as new and expanded GO stations, Nadia Todorova, director of government relations for the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO), commented, "It is going to be so essential to unlock a lot of the assets that they have and reduce the burden on the taxpayer because these projects are expensive to finance and you have to be strategic and you have to be innovative in the way you procure them."

On government plans to consult with municipalities on a new funding formula as part of the gas tax program, RCCAO executive director Andy Manahan said, "Gas taxes are an important revenue source for local governments to build infrastructure, but with better fuel efficiency and a shift to non-fuel vehicles, the Ontario government must take a serious look at future revenue sources to fund transportation and other infrastructure projects."

On plans to standardize asset management language across government departments, Patrick McManus, chair of the Ontario Skilled Trades Alliance, said, "There are only a few lines about asset management in the budget but any time the government is starting to roll forward on asset management planning and standardizing language, we are very supportive of that."

On newly accelerated write-offs for capital and equipment, Clive Thurston, president of the Ontario General Contractors Association, commented, "Instead of giving people grants and money, they are tying it to things. That's the way to do it, you invest, you get a tax break, you hire, you get a tax break."