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Census change could have impact on construction industry

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Ottawa's plans to change Canada's mandatory census long-form could impact future construction decisions, says the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO).

"As our society becomes more complex it is important that detailed questionnaires be maintained so that a range of comparative and trend analyses can be done," said Andy Manahan, executive director of RCCAO. "Rigorous data collection assists decision-makers in making better decisions across Canada at all levels of government."

A growing chorus of academics, political strategists and government officials have denounced federal government plans to change the mandatory 40-page census to a voluntary survey in time for the upcoming 2011 census. RCCAO said that for many of its reports and studies on issues relevant to construction, from transportation planning to sustainable growth and development, its researchers have used the in-depth data the long-form census provides.

"A lot of academic people use this data at a very fine geographic level," said Manahan.

Manahan pointed to RCCAO's recent public infrastructure underinvestment report, by RiskAnalytica, which made extensive use of StatsCan CANSIM data.

Without access to this data base "it would have been difficult to make specific projections on a number of variables", he said.

The Urban Transportation Council of the Transportation Association of Canada (TAC) is concerned the census change could threaten the "quality and consistency" in data it deems "invaluable" to forecast Canadian transportation patterns and needs.

"We are concerned that the expected negative impacts to the reliability, relevance, interpretability and consistency of data collected via the voluntary survey will be significant," TAC stated in a letter to StatsCan.

The National Statistics Council stated the census form change will harm the integrity and quality of the Canadian statistical system. At the same time, the council said it recognizes the concerns about intrusiveness and confidentiality associated with the mandatory long-form census.

The Council said there will be an "inevitable decline in response rates" which will degrade the data on which Canada's statistical system is based. The proposed change could result in StatsCan not being able to publish "robust, detailed information" for neighbourhoods, towns or rural areas.

"Much of the analytic work done by municipalities, private firms, health agencies, highway and transportation planners, school boards and large numbers of other groups that depend upon small-area knowledge and data will no longer be possible," the council said in a statement.

A second council concern is the potential loss of vital benchmark information.

The mandatory long-form allows for accurate benchmarking for the demographics of populations who are difficult to reach or less likely to complete a voluntary survey, it said.

Alex Carrick, CanaData's chief economist, noted that regardless of what census form is used Canadians still deserve freer and easier access to StatsCan and CANSIM information, especially as the world moves more to an information based economy. He did say that a lot of construction activity can take place based on the finer details collected through the census.

"There's a valid point to be made there, however, there's a valid point that in other countries they do not seem to have the need for it," said Carrick.

"The information is being collected in other ways and this is a way for the private sector to perhaps fill in some of those gaps."