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Ontario stand-alone infrastructure ministry should focus on long-term planning: Industry leaders

VINCE VERSACE

staff writer

A focus on long-term infrastructure planning should be the main priority of Ontario's recently minted stand-alone infrastructure ministry, say construction industry leaders.

"The 10-year infrastructure plan currently being developed should be the top priority, said Clive Thurston, president of the Ontario General Contractors Association.

"Let's get the future in place. We need to start treating infrastructure in a serious manner. The industry and municipalities have been pushing hard for a long-term plan and having infrastructure viewed as an investment and not a cost."

Premier Dalton McGuinty recently separated the former "super ministry" of infrastructure and energy in an August 18 cabinet shuffle. Newcomer to cabinet Bob Chiarelli is now infrastructure minister and Brad Duguid, former infrastructure and energy minister, is now responsible for just the energy portfolio.

Industry stakeholders lobbied the province before the last cabinet shuffle this past January calling for a sole infrastructure ministry. The province's infrastructure deficit and the need for long-term funding plans requires focused attention, they argued.

"Infrastructure deserves attention from one ministry and one minister," said Andy Manahan, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario. "Other issues will bridge out from it. If your vision is long-term, that will help define policies necessary for other initiatives, whether they are funding or regulatory."

Thurston said he expects the stand-alone ministry will allow more focus to address policies and procedures of construction-procurement issues, from environmental reviews to permits.

Industry analysts say the separation of the infrastructure and energy portfolio indicates Queen's Park's strong focus on infrastructure and renewable energy initiatives, both recent and coming down the line. The stand-alone ministry could also be an indicator of an infrastructure-heavy pre-election budget next March.

"The biggest project the infrastructure ministry will have is its multi-year spend of \$60 billion over 10 years. Duguid had started some of those consultations already," said Ian Cunningham, president of the Council of Ontario Construction Associations.

"Where is the spend going to be made? There's been significant spending over the last couple of years in social infrastructure, maybe there will be more of a focus on economic driving infrastructure."

McGuinty created the combined infrastructure and energy ministry in June 2008 and placed George Smitherman at its helm. Duguid was appointed minister of the dual portfolios in January 2010 after Smitherman resigned in fall 2009 to run for Toronto mayor in this year's municipal election.

Industry stakeholders had previously said that though both Smitherman and Duguid were capable ministers, the demand of the combined ministry were “complex” and a division of attention was inevitable.

“The creation of the stand-alone ministry is bittersweet in a way, Duguid certainly understood our messages about long-term approaches,” Manahan said. “However, on the sweet side, there is now recognition from the premier’s office that infrastructure should be stand-alone ministry.”