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Auditor General report

Construction alliance urges Ontario to consider infrastructure financing alternatives

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An \$800-million shortfall for bridge repairs identified by Ontario's auditor general should have the province considering alternative financing methods for infrastructure projects, says one industry stakeholder.

"We recognize that governments do not have money," says Andy Manahan, executive director, Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario. "With a \$25 billion deficit today, the province may be forced to take a look at outsourcing to private sector firms to take on the full responsibility for inspection, design and construction and maintenance in the future.

"We see that as the only reasonable alternative."

Auditor General Jim McCarter noted in his annual report this week that some Ontario bridges are in poor condition and the province is taking too long to make repairs. One-third of Ontario's bridges deemed to be in critical need of repair have no repair plans, he found.

McCarter pointed out that MTO, with the use of its Bridge Priority Tool, estimates a \$2.2 billion cost for repairing and rehabilitating bridges in fair or poor condition over the next five years. However, actual funds committed to the Ministry's budget for all bridge work during that period is \$1.4 billion, a shortfall of \$800 million.

RCCAO commissioned a study on the state of Ontario bridges in 2007 and it found that Ontario's municipal bridges need at least \$2 billion over the next five years in rehabilitation cash alone to help avoid a tragic failure.

There are about 14,800 bridges in Ontario and 2,800 of them are under provincial ownership. Municipalities own the remaining 12,000 and are responsible for their maintenance. Since 2004 MTO has built 75 new bridges and rehabilitated 388 existing structures.

In its response to the auditor general findings, MTO says Ontario inspects all 2,800 of its bridges every two years.

"Since 2005, the government has increased infrastructure spending to maintain, rehabilitate, and replace bridges. Commitments include an increase of 50 per cent or \$450 million over a five-year period to rehabilitate approximately 150 bridges throughout the province by 2013," notes MTO in the report.

A lack of "comprehensive information" about municipal bridge conditions was another finding. In a 2006 training workshop, ministry inspectors and external consultants commented that their work was challenged by not being able to gain adequate access to perform thorough, close-up inspections of large bridges, with difficulties securing lane-closures, McCarter wrote.

“The whole aspect of lane closures is quite interesting,” Manahan says. “You have to spend the time to do them and what we discovered in our study was that some municipalities were not investing enough with the amount they spent on consultants. The amount per bridge was too low to do a proper job.”

McCarter found that MTO’s Bridge Management System did not have information on the rehabilitation history for almost one-third of the bridges that were 40 years old or older. MTO confirmed that rehabilitation work had been done on some of these bridges in the last 12 years. Detailed information was available in paper files or on the local database, yet none of this work had been entered into the system.

“To build on the Auditor General’s suggestion to further enhance and strengthen our risk-assessment process, we are implementing mandatory detailed documentation of bridge safety issues when identified by inspectors, clearer identification of potential safety risks, and recording of all bridge maintenance work that is completed,” MTO states.