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Infrastructure reigns as Ontario's top 2012 story

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Infrastructure was once again the story of the year for the Ontario construction industry.

"Despite tough economic times, the provincial government has continued to fund infrastructure and demonstrated a solid commitment to long-term infrastructure investment," said David Frame, director of government relations for the Ontario General Contractors Association (OGCA).

"We knew it was a big challenge in any budget process to continue to fund it. This government's got a big deficit and it has fairly aggressive commitments to reduce and eliminate that deficit."

Though there has been a focus on infrastructure and asset management, there have been major infrastructure and building failures, said Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO) president Andy Manahan, pointing to the roof collapse at the Algo Centre Mall in Elliot Lake, sinkholes on major roadways and the crumbling Gardiner Expressway in Toronto.

"We really do have to keep on top of things...what impact has this had on public confidence in our infrastructure? Everything is not rosy just because the government says you're going to spend a lot, there's a lot to be still done," he said.

The Ontario College of Trades (OCOT) continued to be a contentious topic throughout 2012 as the regulatory body introduced journeyman to apprentice ratios reviews and membership fees.

Patrick Dillon, business manager of the Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council of Ontario, said it has the potential to be a phenomenal organization for Ontario tradespeople.

"As a tradesperson myself, I really look forward to the potential that the College of Trades has for professionalizing the trades and helping both parents and guidance counsellors come to their senses that there is a valid career opportunity in the trades," he said.

The Ontario Construction Employers Coalition (OCEC) has ramped up its efforts against OCOT in 2012 and launched the "Stop The Trades Tax" campaign, which says the new membership fees will be a tax on tradespeople while providing no value added services.

"We just feel that the College of Trades, as a system, is not geared to fix what the fundamental issues in the construction world and that is creating more jobs and getting more people into the industry," said Joe Accardi, executive director of the Ontario Sewer and Waterman Construction Association, a member of OCEC.

The activity of the construction industry across the province was the major story this year for Dillon.

"It seems to me that our man hours are up. Almost every area of the province is presently pretty busy or has been extremely busy in some areas throughout the year. I think that's been the most positive thing from a

worker's standpoint is to have that employment picture that strong."

Manahan said he knew it would be difficult to get certain legislation and regulations changed with a minority government so the RCCAO focused on making changes in a non-regulatory way.

He pointed to the June passing of Bill 8, the Ontario Underground Infrastructure Notification System Act, 2012 that is stuck because of the prorogation of the legislature.

"Because of the current government situation, the regulations aren't proceeding at all. There might be some dialogue, but it's not really moving ahead right now," he said.

Council of Ontario Construction Associations (COCA) president Ian Cunningham has noticed a positive pace of reform at the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) in 2012.

"The initiation of the Arthur's Report...was a starting point for major reforms and the commitment of the WSIB for seeing it through has been impressive."

Merit Ontario has been active with COCA dealing with prompt payment legislation.

"Prompt payment is good for everyone," said Gordon Sproule, chair of Merit Ontario.

"If the employer can be paid promptly, he can turn around and hire more employees and do more work. I think every sector, whether it's Conservative, Liberal or NDP would support prompt payment and they do."

This year saw the implementation of a Chief Prevention Council, one of the recommendations made in the Tony Dean Expert Advisory Panel Report. The council is designed to protect workers and improve workplace health and safety across the province.

"Any changes that advance health and safety in the construction industry should be met with open arms by everyone, on the employee and the employer side. I would welcome any changes coming that are more effective and protect the employer and the employee in this industry," said Sproule.

Accardi said the Construction and Design Alliance of Ontario has made a lot of headway with Infrastructure Ontario (IO) and its bundling of projects. He said it's important to keep content local.

"When Ontario companies are allowed to be part of or even invest in these P3 (public-private partnerships) or IO projects, that is reinvestment they put in our economy. That's a key component. Whereas with the international firms, the certainty of reinvestment is a lot less than certainty of reinvestment with Ontario based firms or even Canadian based firms for that sense."