



Council supports request to 'tighten up' construction timelines

By [Ray Spiteri](#), Niagara Falls Review

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The City of Niagara Falls supports a transportation and public works association's call for the province to reform the municipal class environmental assessment process they say has made local infrastructure projects longer in duration and more costly.

The Ontario Good Roads Association, which represents the infrastructure interests of Canadian municipalities, is encouraging all communities to adopt a resolution calling on the Minister of the Environment and Climate Change to accelerate the application for review of the process.

The association points to an analysis by the **Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario** indicating the time to complete an environmental assessment rose from 19 months to 26.7 months and costs went from an average of \$113,300 to \$386,500.

A coalition, made up of the alliance and the Municipal Engineers Association, have successfully applied to have a review of the process.

A resolution, endorsed by Niagara Falls city council during its recent meeting, states impact studies and public meetings required by the process often take two years or more to complete before construction can commence.

It claims assessment requirements to evaluate alternatives are often not well aligned with prior or municipal land-use planning decisions.

The resolution notes the Auditor General of Ontario has tabled recommendations for modernizing the process, however, in spite of written commitments made by the Ministry of the Environment between 2013 and 2015, no action has been taken.

It states local projects that don't have the necessary approvals could lose out on the next intake of upper-level government funding.

By approving the resolution, the City of Niagara Falls formally requested that the minister take "immediate" steps to expedite the review process; that the minister support changes to better integrate and harmonize the assessment process with other processes defined under the Planning Act; and that the minister amend the scope of assessment reports and studies to reduce duplication with existing public processes and decisions made under municipal Official Plans and provincial legislation.

Geoff Holman, the city's director of municipal works, said he understands why those in the industry are looking for "ways to tighten up the timelines for the EA process, so that we can align ourselves and our projects to be eligible for the next intake of the funding program to be announced by the province and feds."

He said most of the projects the city has dealt with during the last couple years have been straight-forward infrastructure projects.

"But when you get into projects where you're building new pumping stations and new sewage treatment plants like we will be in the next five years or so, the concern is that the process that's currently in place is not as responsive as we need it to be."

Holman said the current process creates "a lot of uncertainty."

"In cases where land acquisition is required, or approvals are required, it really confuses the matter and pushes the cost up. It affects our ability to get the approvals in place and put the work out on the counter for tender. It's hard then for contractors, they're trying to line up their work and we're trying to plan when we want to get this work done. The development community is wanting to get the infrastructure in place and we want to resolve some problems, but a lot of times when this situation occurs, it makes it more difficult for us to plan ..."

Mayor Jim Diodati said the idea is to cut red tape and make for a more expedited and smoother process.

“We want to have a streamlined approach for things that are approved, so that they can proceed,” he said.

“We’re not talking about erroneous things outside the urban boundary, but things that are part of the Official Plan, inside the urban boundary, that have been approved, just to move it through the process more expediently.”