

Ontario stakeholders pan, praise feds' new training plan

Don Wall March 28, 2019



Ontario construction industry stakeholders had praise for new skills training initiatives contained in the federal budget during a recent round of analysis but on the infrastructure file, the refrain continues to be, they'll believe it when they see it.

The federal infrastructure rollout was raised by David Frame, director of government relations for the Ontario General Contractors Association, Ian Cunningham, president of the Council of Ontario Construction Associations (COCA), and **Andy Manahan, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario.**

Programs of note to the stakeholders in the March 19 budget included a \$2.2-billion top-up to the federal Gas Tax Fund supporting municipal infrastructure; reiteration of the 12-year, \$180-billion Investing in Canada plan; a new Canada Training Benefit (CTB) that will offer credits of \$250 per year to qualifying workers to be put towards skills training, with a cap of \$5,000; and two other skilled trades initiatives — \$46 million in funding over four years for Skills Canada to develop a promotional program to attract young Canadians, and a new \$6-million Apprenticeship Strategy with the mandate to address barriers to entry.

“It is funding some infrastructure but the infrastructure spending every year falls short of the infrastructure allocation,” said Frame of the infrastructure funding. “It is an ongoing challenge to get the infrastructure going. They finally signed an agreement with Ontario on the shared federal/provincial municipal program, and they announced the first stage of a rollout about two weeks ago for small and northern communities.

“That is a step in the right direction.”

Commented Manahan on the two-stage Investing in Canada plan, “Phase one of the program was excruciatingly slow and phase two, they did not sign the bilateral agreement with Ontario until last year, March of 2018.”

He noted Budget 2019 acknowledged the implementation problem and offered explanations and a strategy to deal with it.

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— Ian Cunningham

Council of Ontario Construction Associations

“A large part of it was, there was perhaps too much scrutiny of applications that came in for relatively small projects,” Manahan said.

“It’s interesting how the feds are making infrastructure funding available directly to municipalities, bypassing the province, which has limited capacity and is focusing on a financially sustainable future,” said Cunningham in an email.

Frame said the CTB could be of some value but for several reasons its relevance may be limited.

“They came up with a program that can be useful but in some ways it is difficult as well,” Frame said.

“It is not targeted to need. What we said to both levels of government is, we need a skills strategy. We know the feds mentioned a skills strategy in the budget but we don’t have one yet and we are not going to have one until after an election. So we have a ways to go.”

Manahan praised the CTB, the new Skills Canada initiative, another to expand the recruitment of women and others trades promotion measures the government has announced.

“A national campaign will be created to promote skilled trades as a first choice for careers, so I really like the wording on that,” he said. ‘I am very supportive of that thrust.’”

Frame said he has his eyes on the Ontario budget, set to be delivered April 11, to see how the Doug Ford government policies on training will mesh with those of the federal Liberals.

“The province is showing something, the announcement on the education changes were very promising, they committed to implementing orientation toward the trades in grade school and throughout high school,” said Frame.

“They put the trades on par with math and science. That is a huge change and that is hopefully the start of the development of a strategy that we’ll see more of in the budget in April.”

Manahan said he has doubts that the federal budget’s measures to stimulate the housing sector by encouraging the participation of first-time homebuyers would be effective.

The budget raises the level of funding that can be accessed by first-time buyers from RRSPs and introduces a new shared equity loan to be administered by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.

“It will have a limited affect,” said Manahan. “There will be a certain number of people across Canada who will be able to take advantage of it, which is good as far as it goes, but it won’t have the stimulative effects that we were hoping for.”

Overall, a COCA statement argued, the budget is “designed to position the Liberal government ahead of the election currently scheduled for Oct. 21.

“The Liberals (are) opting to invest rather than pay down the deficit budget.”

Cunningham added, “It’s clearly an election-type blueprint for the government’s re-election with lots of spending.

“Unlike Ontario, the federal government is better positioned financially to push money out the door. And it’s near the end of its mandate and has the political motivation to do so.”