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Construction asks: How much for infrastructure?

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Despite encouraging talk from the Ontario government about the importance of sustained infrastructure investment, construction industry leaders are waiting to see how the numbers break down in today's budget before they get their hopes up.

"In some years, governments have severely under-spent and used it to say 'hey look we paid down the deficit a lot more than we said we would' and they did it by increasing the infrastructure deficit," said David Frame, director of government relations for the [Ontario General Contractors Association](#).

The government recently announced the deficit is now down to \$9.8 billion, a reduction of \$5 billion from last year's forecast. Finance Minister Charles Sousa said the government is fully committed to eliminating the deficit by 2017-18.

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"It's one thing to put the money in the budget, it's another thing to actually put the projects out and to spend it," said Frame. "What worries me is that they announced the deficit is way down. Where did that money come from? It was a big drop."

The industry hopes that the government extends the \$35-billion over three year infrastructure plan, as it did in last year's budget, in which planned infrastructure spending of \$12.9 billion in 2012-13 was earmarked.

"We'd like to see an extension of that. Hopefully we'll see funding levels stay at the levels now and see some increases to that base level funding as well," said Ashley De Souza, vice-president policy and government relations for the [Council of Ontario Construction Associations](#) (COCA).

Funding for transit infrastructure will be a hot topic in this year's budget though details are not expected to be released as Metrolinx is expected to deliver, by the end of May, an investment strategy identifying revenue tools it will use to fund the \$50 billion Big Move project.

**Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario** executive director Andy Manahan hopes to see a dedicated account for transit infrastructure spending announced in the budget. He has suggested to government that it could seed that account with the money obtained since the July 2010 implementation of HST on fuel taxes.

"That would be a goodwill gesture and a confidence builder with respect to public and municipal governments that this is something we're serious about in terms of new revenue tools," he said, noting that there is a confidence gap between the public and the government.

"That kind of money has to be spent smartly and judiciously."

Since significant infrastructure investment is expected to continue in this budget, Sean Reid, the Ontario and federal director of the Progressive Contractors Association of Canada, hopes to see how open and competitive tendering for public infrastructure could be addressed.

“The question on our minds is how committed is this government to ensuring that those infrastructure dollars are spent as cost effectively and efficiently as possible. How committed are they to true open tendering of public infrastructure projects. That’s what we’ll be watching for,” he said.

The [Ontario Road Builders’ Association](#) (ORBA) would like to see a continued focus on assisting municipalities with asset management.

“The fund that was in place is an important first step and we’d like to see continued and increased support for that as well as for funding for municipalities,” explained ORBA executive director Geoff Wilkinson.

In his recent speech to the [Economic Club of Canada](#), Sousa highlighted the importance of a highly skilled workforce to Ontario’s economy.

Patrick Dillon, business manager of the [Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council of Ontario](#), would like to see the government recognize and utilize the province’s training capacity.

“They primarily use the community colleges and they support the training centres somewhat in trades upgrading, but not much on the apprenticeship side, and I think there’s a major opportunity there,” he explained.

“If they utilize that, it’ll be good for our Aboriginals, our youth, our women, all the people that we have to depend on going forward to fill the openings in trades training programs.”

COCA believes that skills training should be addressed with an inclusive, comprehensive approach.

“I’d like to see a multi-pronged approach where both industry and government are at the table looking at the different initiatives that we can look at, whether it’s attracting young people into the workforce, whether it’s having our existing workforce longer or bringing in foreign trained workers as well,” said De Souza.

The budget will be presented today at 4 p.m. at Queen’s Park.