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Cabinet shuffle

Construction industry assesses impact of Smitherman's resignation

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Construction has lost a champion on the provincial energy and infrastructure front with the announcement that George Smitherman will run for mayor of Toronto, say some industry stakeholders.

"There will be an effect on environmental assessment reform and full-cost pricing for sewers," says Andy Manahan, executive director of the **Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario**.

"We suspect that without him, on those particular issues, things are going to slow down."

Smitherman gave notice to Premier Dalton McGuinty recently that he would be stepping down to run for Toronto mayor after months of speculation. Since June 2008, with the energy and infrastructure portfolios, Smitherman impressed various industry insiders with the progress he made on key issues of infrastructure investment, green energy growth and policy reform.

"One of the best things he did is that he rekindled a friendship with the federal government," notes Manahan. "Certainly with John Baird as infrastructure minister in Ottawa, together they made a lot of strong announcements for projects across Ontario."

McGuinty is expected to announce that Gerry Phillips, a past energy ministry minister, will be sworn in as energy and infrastructure minister. Smitherman also was deputy premier, but that post is not expected to be filled until a cabinet shuffle in the new year.

Manahan does not expect Phillips to be much of an "activist minister" since he will not be running for re-election in the next provincial election and may hold his new portfolio only until the new year.

"Obviously there are some ministers like the environment minister and the premier's office that understand the importance in dealing with some of our issues. However, without Smitherman to champion them, it will be much more difficult to get anything done before Christmas," adds Manahan.

John Mollenhauer, president of the Toronto Construction Association, says it is no surprise that Smitherman has entered the Toronto mayoral race and says he will be missed at Queen's Park.

"Smitherman has done some good things provincially and is obviously well supported by the premier. His relationship with the premier will be perceived as both good news and bad news," Mollenhauer says.

Opposition critics as Queen's Park speculate that Smitherman has stepped down because of increased criticism and investigation into the eHealth Ontario spending scandal and untendered contracts awarded during his time as health minister.

Mollenhauer says though Smitherman may not be "out from the under cloud of the eHealth scandal" he did

accomplish quite a bit in his five years as health minister and his time as energy and infrastructure minister.

“He led the charge on green initiatives and that is a home run,” Mollenhauer says.

McGuinty said in a statement that Smitherman can be credited with spearheading Ontario’s Green Energy Act, which will create 50,000 Ontario jobs while fighting the effects of climate change.

“And he has worked tirelessly to turn our economic stimulus plan into construction jobs for Ontario workers in every part of our province,” said McGuinty.