

DAILY COMMERCIAL NEWS

AND CONSTRUCTION RECORD

October 17, 2011

Construction associations call for infrastructure focus from Ontario Liberals

KELLY LAPOINTE

staff writer

The two previous Liberal governments have been “infrastructure friendly” and industry stakeholders hope things continue that way as Dalton McGuinty enters his third term in office.

Prior to the recent [Ontario election](#), the Liberals brought forward a 10-year infrastructure plan and Andy Manahan, Executive Director of the **Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO)**, said though the plan was viewed by most as a framework, many had to deal with the implementation so there is some understanding of how the government intends to move forward.

“It’s our role now as various associations to make sure that the implementation is carried through in a way that sees projects being built in a timely fashion,” he said.

Karen Renkema, Director Government Relations with the Ontario Road Builders’ Association (ORBA) said the previous governments have recognized the province’s infrastructure deficit and twice implemented plans to invest in core infrastructure. They’ve realized sustained investment year over year through the Ministry of Transportation budget.

“There have been a couple of ways that they’ve invested in the municipalities,” she said.

“There’s still more work to be done on municipal infrastructure. How will the federal government, the provincial government and the municipalities work together to sustain that municipal infrastructure.”

Ontario General Contractors Association (OGCA) Director of Government Relations David Frame said the election is important to the construction industry because the Government of Ontario is by far the largest buyer of non-residential construction in the province.

“They’re going to have increased pressures to spend on the social side. So the government’s got decisions to make. Are they going to spend or are they going to cut back, and if they do, where do they cut back?” he said in a statement.

“For us at OGCA, the important thing is to make sure the government continues to embrace investment in infrastructure spending, it directly relates to future growth of Ontario and that’s key for all of us.”

But a minority government could interrupt some of the flow of these projects.

“It’ll pressure us as organizations to make sure that our message is very clear to all three political parties,” said Renkema.

Considering Ontario’s budgetary deficit, Renkema offered that it may be time to re-focus on infrastructure need versus infrastructure want. She said this conversation needs to be had, regardless of a minority or majority government.

“I think further consideration and further conversation will have to happen within all three parties about what is the core infrastructure, what is the infrastructure we need? We would argue that’s the infrastructure that would help the economy grow, such as roads, transit and bridges.”

All three major provincial parties allocated \$35 billion over three years in infrastructure funding in their platforms, so Manahan said the government should be able to move forward, work together and approve projects.

He pointed to experts like Craig Alexander, chief economist at the TD Bank, who support infrastructure investment to improve Ontario’s economy.

“You’ve got a lot of different voices out there saying that infrastructure makes a lot of sense to invest in. So it’s not just construction associations or so-called self-interested groups that are making these statements, it’s a broader chorus of people, which is I think important,” said Manahan.

Another contentious election issue was the Ontario College of Trades. While Tim Hudak and the Progressive Conservatives were ready to abolish it, the Liberals brought it into legislation in 2009 and all indications point to them continuing to support it.

Renkema hopes the Liberals will give some attention to the reports that have been conducted on the College of Trades, like the Cardus report entitled “College of Trades: An impossible institution”, which has many construction employers calling for the abolition or complete overhaul of the institution.

She would like to see a much more open communication between the Liberals and stakeholders.

“Information has not been easy to find. They haven’t been keeping stakeholders up to date on the movement of the College. I think if anything, the Liberal minority government will cause them to have to be a lot more open and transparent about activities,” she said, adding that a broader conversation needs to take place publicly about the internal and conflict of interest issues that were identified.

“Now that it’s been realized as an actual physical body, I think people now have formed different opinions and maybe things aren’t moving along quite as some stakeholders expected.”