

Getting shovels into the ground

Andy Manahan, National Post

A primary goal of the federal government's recent investment in infrastructure is to inject stimulus funds into local economies across Canada as a way to jump-start the recovery. While public infrastructure and building projects are in the public interest under any circumstances, timely infrastructure investments are particularly important during periods of economic uncertainty as a way to create jobs and build for the future.

We have heard politicians say that projects are "committed" or that "funds have been earmarked," but many in the construction industry have yet to see municipalities issue tenders for these infrastructure projects. This invites the question: "Is infrastructure on track, or is the rollout of crucial projects being held up by complex planning and assessment legislation?"

Ontario's construction industry met with provincial government recently for a roundtable discussion to address this question. The goal was to review the status of infrastructure funding and provide advice to government on how the roll-out process could be improved.

One observation was that municipalities have been constrained because of the requirement that their projects be "shovel-ready." At the same time, municipal projects will have to be completed by March 31, 2011, or risk having federal funding cut off.

Beyond these particular issues, representatives of the construction industry believe that better priority-setting has to occur, and that there are a number of approval-process inefficiencies that need to be dealt with to enable more sensible infrastructure program delivery.

In particular, the lack of co-ordination between land use planning and environmental assessment (EA) processes continues to cause delays and must be addressed if governments are collectively going to succeed in building a strong economic and social foundation.

Land use planning was primarily concerned with zoning matters prior to the 1970s, but now, consideration of environmental issues is embedded in key pieces of legislation such as Ontario's Growth Plan and the Greenbelt Plan. The province must consider how an improved approach will benefit the roll-out of infrastructure projects critical to implementation of the growth plan.

Similarly, we believe that by rationalizing provincial and federal EA processes, governments can provide a more streamlined way to approve vital projects. We applaud the efforts of the governments in Ottawa and Queen's Park to eliminate duplication in EA processes, but this initiative has been held up in a court challenge.

Let me give one example of the sort of problem that municipalities are facing. A municipality in central

Ontario recently completed a three-year land use planning process for an urban expansion. The plan was appealed to the Ontario Municipal Board by local residents who opposed urban expansion. Even after primary approvals, the same stakeholders were able to challenge the provision of trunk sewer services. Ultimately, the Minister of the Environment refused their request, but the project was delayed for over a year and a half by the process.

We propose that instead of the two distinct processes of land use and environmental assessments, the public should be engaged through one process and allow the EA system to operate in tandem with rapid deployment of government resources on infrastructure investments.

Communities in Ontario are already demonstrating how integration can save considerable time. Four municipalities in the Greater Golden Horseshoe area have piloted integrating land use planning with EA processes by running concurrent processes and engaging private landowners in a block planning process. The advantages of these approaches are that the two processes are done in tandem, as opposed to back to back.

Our industry provides core infrastructure that can provide immediate employment, generate locally based income and taxes and is good for the long-term economic prosperity of our communities. We look forward to working with government on improving various processes for the future.

- Andy Manahan is executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO). This article is adapted from a presentation he delivered to federal officials last week, about strategies to streamline the approval of infrastructure projects.

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