

ECONOMIC STIMULUS

Academics tout wisdom of spending on decaying campus infrastructure

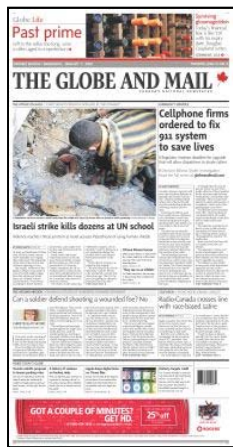
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Patching roofs and fixing windows on Canadian campuses is an efficient way to pump money into all regions of the country and better prepare the next generation of workers, postsecondary leaders are telling politicians looking for quick fixes for the sagging economy.

Groups representing universities and colleges across Canada, anxious to be included in new stimulus spending, are pitching campus renovations as an efficient way to get money and jobs flowing to a wide range of communities. Billions of dollars in repairs have been identified and work could begin this construction season, they say. Such spending, the groups argue, will create jobs in the short term and better facilities for learning for years to come.

"I think this has a lot of the things the government is looking for," said Gary Evans, director of government relations with the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, one of the groups promoting the idea in Ottawa. "Some of this work could start immediately. Others could start in six to 12 months."

The association, which has members in about 80 communities, is asking Ottawa for \$2.4-billion to spend on "urgent" repairs on university campuses. At a time of worsening economic conditions, Mr. Evans called the request "responsible and prudent." The group estimates the total campus-maintenance backlog at about \$5.1-billion. That includes everything from new plumbing and heating systems to fixing crumbling foundations on aging buildings, repairs the association says would also save energy and money.

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At Dalhousie University in Halifax, the list of jobs adds up to about \$250-million, said Jeff Lamb, the assistant vice-president of facilities, with about half of that work related specifically to buildings used for research - where traditionally Ottawa has directed the bulk of its funding.

At the Dunn physics building, for example, federal money has helped provide new lab space, but the stonework on the outside is crumbling and the electrical and cooling systems need updating.

"It's definitely stuff that needs to be done," Mr. Lamb said, putting the tab for repairs to the building at \$12.7-million.

The message coming from the country's community colleges is much the same, although the \$5-billion request includes money for new building projects as well as repairs.

James Knight, president of the Association of Canadian Community Colleges, is set to meet with Conservative MPs tomorrow to discuss his group's proposal, laid out in a letter last month. His group expects enrolment will swell during a recession, and changing workplace demands will spur many people to return for retraining.

That's going to require new space, he said, and renovations to older buildings.

Mr. Knight - who used to represent Canadian municipalities in Ottawa - said building new roads and sewers will produce fewer jobs for the same dollars than the more labour-intensive construction projects on his members' campuses. "If you are going to spend on infrastructure, college construction is the way to go," he said.

In Ontario, the group representing universities is asking for \$500-million to "quick-start" campus renovations to create jobs and simulate the economy. "These are projects that are ready to go. It's a way to get things in the pipeline now," said Paul Genest, president of the Council of Ontario Universities.

COU is also asking for \$2-billion over two years for new construction and \$270-million in "bridge financing" to help universities cope with the \$185-million in lost revenue from the declining value of endowment funds as well as rising enrolment and operating costs.

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