

Education-related infrastructure spending in high gear

BY MIKE DE SOUZA, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE MAY 25, 2009

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Transport, Infrastructure and Communities Minister John Baird has said that there was progress in recent months in negotiations and agreements to get money flowing into infrastructure projects.

Photograph by: Don Healy, Regina Leader-Post

OTTAWA — Although municipalities are seeing numerous delays in getting their hands on federal infrastructure funding, representatives of post-secondary institutions acknowledge that their members have moved into the fast lane when it comes to getting grants to repair and rebuild facilities.

"When you think about the municipal side, it seems to take years and we're doing in weeks what they've been trying to do for years," said James Knight, president and CEO of the Association of Canadian Community Colleges. "There's a lot of good will around this (infrastructure spending in post-secondary schools) because everyone knows that governments benefit when you produce more college graduates that get jobs for sure and they start paying taxes."

The comments come in the wake of several multimillion-dollar infrastructure announcements by the federal and provincial governments at various post-secondary institutions in Ontario on Monday.

Knight's association estimated in January that there were \$5 billion worth of construction projects on the waiting list at colleges and CEGEPs across the country, and was pleased when the Harper government announced a \$2-billion fund to respond to their demands in its 2009 budget. In the weeks

and months that followed, he said that negotiations have moved at a fast pace with agreements signed in several provinces, including British Columbia and Alberta.

Knight has also said he expects a deal to be announced shortly with the province of Quebec for infrastructure needs at its own CEGEPs and universities.

"The officials that are handling this in Ottawa tell me that they haven't had a day off in nine weeks," said Knight. "They're just working around the clock. These aren't easy negotiations, and their objective is to get investments flowing and to get workers working on projects as quickly as possible."

Knight said the investments were desperately needed for many schools that were forced to turn away thousands of qualified students because they didn't have enough classroom space to accommodate them. In many cases, he said, the construction work can begin immediately after agreements with the federal government are approved since they consist of long-awaited repairs to deteriorating infrastructure on campuses.

Meantime, Canadian municipalities have been baffled about a multibillion-dollar federal infrastructure plan from 2007 that has seen little money flow into their communities.

Transport, Infrastructure and Communities Minister John Baird has said that there was progress in recent months in negotiations and agreements to get the money flowing. The government has also said it would reimburse cities for infrastructure spending within weeks of getting an invoice for new construction work approved under an existing federal program.

"We are working co-operatively with provinces and municipalities," Baird said Monday during question period in the House of Commons. "We are getting the job done. That non-partisan work is really paying dividends."

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