

# Time for infrastructure plans to do more than just fill potholes

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Of all the cabinet appointments made by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, none may be as quietly poetic as that of Amarjeet Sohi, the new minister of infrastructure and communities.

Sohi, an MP from Edmonton, is a former bus driver and a two-term city councillor. He could be the most qualified infrastructure minister ever.

Last week, in his first speech, Sohi talked about the new Liberal government's ambitious infrastructure plans, which involve doubling total federal investment to \$125 billion over 10 years. In particular, Sohi said Canada must change its approach to repairing, replacing and enhancing our aging infrastructure.

"We need to expand how we think about infrastructure," Sohi said in that speech. "In the past, when we thought about funding and investing in infrastructure, we often framed it as paying for roads, bridges, transit, water and sewers. But infrastructure is really about communities, and about people."

With so much federal money on its way, and most provinces ramping up their infrastructure programs to historic levels, it's really time to open up a new chapter in the debate over how best to spend these new resources.

It's important to remember that infrastructure funding serves two main purposes. On the one hand, it helps create and maintain the hard assets that the country needs to function and prosper. Roads, bridges, public transit, sewage treatment, clean water — these are the hallmarks of a modern, fully functioning society.

However, public spending on infrastructure is also the single most effective way government can help the economy grow. Government gets more than two dollars of economic activity from every dollar in infrastructure investment, the result of all that money trickling down through contractors, suppliers, and professional services all the way to front-line employment.

In the past seven years, the former Conservative government tried to serve both sides of the infrastructure equation; there was money to serve the short-term need to jump-start the economy and money to provide the hard assets that make Canada a more functional, more modern country. But there were aspects of the Building Canada fund that leaned too much to the short term, at the expense of more strategic infrastructure goals.

In recent years, Ottawa has put a heavy emphasis on funding "shovel-ready" projects conceived and designed by the provinces and municipalities. This ensured the money the federal government was investing was out working to grow the economy as soon as possible. It did not, however, ensure that the best projects were funded.

In Manitoba, as in many other provinces, the shovel-ready requirement meant paving projects, which involve less planning and engineering, took precedence over more strategic investments. "Make it black, Jack," has been the rallying cry in Manitoba Infrastructure and Transportation when the federal stimulus money came flowing in. True to form, this past construction season Manitoba poured more than four million tonnes of asphalt, an all-time record.

And make no mistake about it, the paving work that was performed with federal stimulus funds has tremendous value to Manitoba, the people who work in the construction industry and to all of us who drive on the province's roads. However, it did not transform the province's infrastructure.

In this context, Sohi's comments take on much more importance. This is certainly the time in the nation's history when we need to take a bit of the emphasis off "make it black, Jack" and look at more strategic infrastructure goals.

Can Trudeau deliver on that goal? We still don't have the full details of the Liberal's new infrastructure program. And given the fact Ottawa may still be in a budget deficit, contrary to the assurances the Tories gave that a surplus had arrived, we still don't even know when the Liberals will unleash new infrastructure money.

However, Sohi's speech in Ottawa last week is a hopeful sign that has a lot of people at the provincial and municipal levels wondering if the time has come for transformative infrastructure investment.

What would that look like in Manitoba? Some may look to the construction of an all-season road on the east side of Lake Winnipeg — a project Trudeau pledged support for during the federal election campaign — as a transformative project.

Or perhaps something truly visionary like the relocation of the CPR Winnipeg Yards in central Winnipeg.

Premier Greg Selinger recently revealed he has secured participation from railway officials to discuss a long-term plan to relocate the yards and redevelop the land. This, in part, to avoid having to spend upwards of \$1 billion on bridges and underpasses bypass the yards.

Critics have scoffed at the plans, and devoted inordinate amounts of time to listing all of the hurdles that stand in the way. They have viewed the participation of the railways with great skepticism, suggesting they are not interested parties to the goal of relocating the yards and major rail lines that run through Winnipeg.

However, a federal infrastructure program that fully and completely lives up to Sohi's pledge to put communities and people at the forefront of decisions on investment bodes well for projects like the CPR relocation. Sohi is describing a program that has the ambition to change communities for the better, and jump-start the economy.

Over the last decade, we have used infrastructure investment to smooth our roads, fortify our bridges and improve critical services such as sewage and water treatment. Isn't it time that we get a bit more ambitious about our infrastructure goals, and demand projects that do more than just fill potholes?