

# Calgary mayor pleased with Prime Minister Trudeau reiterating infrastructure commitment

by IAN CAMPBELL

Posted Jun 3, 2016 4:42 pm MDT



Mayor Naheed Nenshi. File photo. (Kaitlin Lee, 660 News)

Calgary's mayor appeared to be pleased with what he heard as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau gave a speech to 1,600 municipal leaders Friday morning in Winnipeg.

It was a speech that was heavy on the importance of infrastructure, with Trudeau reiterating his commitment of Ottawa providing \$120 billion over the next ten years.

But it was the subtext that Naheed Nenshi was listening to closely, in particular to how this cash infusion will work.

“Well certainly he was talking a lot about the importance of infrastructure and why governments should invest in it and I was thinking ‘good he got the briefing notes from me’, really from all of the municipalities” Nenshi chuckled. “So it was great to hear him talk about that, the most important thing he said was he talked about how local decisions must be made locally.”

Trudeau in his comments told leaders there are federal objectives but he's not interested in making every local decision.

“This is a very big deal because it means that, it’s what we’ve been asking for and it means we can cut a lot of red tape and a lot of bureaucracy in getting infrastructure money spent and out the door because if they’re able to say to us ‘look this is what your allocation is, you have to spend it on these categories’, say green infrastructure which they’re interested in, or social infrastructure, or water and waste water, well we can do that, we have lists of projects in all of those areas and we’re very happy to go ahead and start building things and start getting people to work.”

“If we have bureaucrats in Ottawa saying ‘you should build this bridge instead of that road or you should build this library instead of that rec centre’ that’s where the whole thing starts to break down.”

The Prime Minister has placed a caveat on the infrastructure dollars telling municipal leaders any projects they choose have to comply with Ottawa’s push of creating jobs and dealing with climate change.

Nenshi says the province can’t 100 per cent be bypassed but says what’s important here is they’re hearing a 100 per cent willingness to work with local governments.

“Of course the proof is in the pudding, the proof is when the checks come and certainly no checks have come yet,” he said. “But we’re hearing a lot of language how to make the stuff work and I think that’s very, very important and in some cases the federal government and municipalities can deal with one another directly and in other cases we can deal with the province but the real issue is to get the dollars to flow and to minimize the red tape and the bureaucracy in between the dollars flowing and the projects actually getting started.”

Québec has recently suggested Ottawa is lagging in the area of getting infrastructure money out, Nenshi didn’t react to their comments, but did say he’d like to get phase one money flowing.

Nenshi says much of the Phase 1 funding was designed for Alberta and he says in Calgary the need for immediate money is less acute of a problem because the city has the ability to borrow, it’s a bigger issue for smaller municipalities.

A lot of those projects have to be completed by 2018 and he's hoping that will arrive in the coming weeks to take advantage of the construction season.

According to Nenshi, Calgary is up to the task.

“Calgary no problem, we can make it work because of course we have a huge unfunded capital list and so we have been working for many, many months to be ready for an infusion of cash to look at the stuff we weren't going to build until 17 or 18, what we can move forward of existing projects, what we can accelerate so we're very happy to accept any infusion of cash and we'll put it to work right away.”

“What we're looking for is an allocation of infrastructure money that is based on need, not necessarily based on size or per capita,” he said. “So when it's about transit for example we suggest some of the transit capital dollars should be based on ridership and projected ridership, when it comes to housing it really needs to be based on the cities that are facing the most acute housing crisis and homelessness problem and that also is a shift as to how the government has traditionally dealt with this.”

The only exception to the above is the Green Line LRT, he's hoping they'll stick with their previous commitment, at this stage they're still waiting for the province to come through with it's fair share.

He's hoping to bring the idea to both levels of government later this summer and into the fall.

Nenshi also added he'll be looking to the Prime Minister for answers on housing, reconciliation with indigenous peoples and an anti-poverty strategy.

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities conference continues in Winnipeg until Sunday.

To hear the full interview between 660's Ian Campbell and Mayor Naheed Nenshi click the player.