

City's wish list for federal infrastructure cash compiled without council's consent

City councillors saw the list of projects when the rest of us did — at a federal government photo op

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Ottawa mayor Jim Watson told reporters there wasn't enough time for a council vote on the city's wish list for federal infrastructure money. (Alistair Steele/CBC)

During last fall's federal election campaign, the Liberals promised to boost public transit investment by \$6 billion over the next four years.

In March of this year, the Liberals' inaugural budget announced \$3.4 billion of that funding would be made available within months. And in April, the federal government told provinces exactly how much money they could expect. The eligibility criteria was released by May.

You'd think that with that kind of heads-up from the feds, the City of Ottawa would have had enough time to sort out its wish list in a sensible, transparent way.

But the list of projects, worth a combined \$300 million — \$156 million of which will come from municipal coffers — was compiled behind closed doors by city staff and the mayor's office.

Councillors saw the list for the first time when the federal government revealed it alongside provincial and local officials at a photo op on Aug. 23. Our municipal representatives had no input, and were never even asked for comments before the list was submitted.

And still, at Tuesday's meeting of the finance and economic development committee, not a single councillor in attendance asked a single question about this huge expenditure of city money before approving the item.

No time, Watson claims

Mayor Jim Watson told reporters this week there simply wasn't time to take the list to council before submitting it to the province, which is administering the infrastructure program on the federal government's behalf.

"The reality is we would have had to have a special council meeting called at the last minute in the depths of summer and we felt we didn't want to miss the deadline," said Watson.

It's true that the province only officially asked for the list of transit infrastructure projects on July 25, when council was on summer break. But staff clearly began working the wish list months earlier.

A prioritized list could have — and should have — been brought to council for discussion before being finalized.

City staff say council must still approve the list of projects before it's made official. But how meaningful is that, really? The mayor has already warned that changing the list at this stage would cause delays.

"If there were to be changes, we'd have to go back and seek federal and provincial permission again and staff tell me we'd be back at the bottom of the list and we'd have to work our way up," Watson told reporters.

Projects on list tied to Phase 1 LRT

The federal funds can be put toward shovel-ready projects that encourage active transportation, including transit, cycling and walking, as long as the projects were not already budgeted for or started. In other words, the fund isn't intended as replacement money for projects already underway.

For example, one of biggest-ticket items is \$40 million for two new train sets. The city would have had to buy them for Phase 2, but accelerating the purchase lets the municipality share the cost and have the trains as backup for Phase 1. Good plan.

But 10 items on the list are included in Phase 1 of LRT, which presumably were already included in the \$2.1-billion. How do they qualify?

According to John Moser, a senior manager at the city, these projects are "enhancements to the existing contract and are additional to the \$2.1-billion budget."

Some of these are multi-million-dollar head scratchers. Consider the \$30 million to be spent on "Transportation Demand Management during LRT construction." It's to pay for transit detours during the construction of Phase 1. How is this an "enhancement?" Were we not planning for detours?

Or what about \$1.75 million for fare gate entrances at transitway stations, \$2 million for customer waiting areas at major Confederation Line stations, \$1.5 million for a transit operator crew room at Bayview and \$3 million for a Tunney's Pasture bus loop, which opened at the end of June?

These are all projects that sure sound like they should be included in the \$2.1-billion Phase 1 budget. If they weren't included, why not? What sort of LRT system are we building that doesn't already envision "customer waiting areas" at major stations?

Clear discussion needed

If they really are enhancements, it means that the city is promising to pay out millions more for the LRT. That may be a sound idea. As the mayor points out, it would be foolish to turn down the feds' offer to pick up half the tab for transit items.

But there should be some clear discussion among councillors before they sign off on spending tens of millions of dollars. That's why we elected them.

In fairness, a few councillors have indicated they will raise some of these issues at council, even if changes to the list are unlikely.

Coun. Diane Deans had a list of questions she was planning to ask at FEDco on Tuesday, but was stuck in traffic returning from her cottage. When she arrived at the committee about 15 minutes late, the item had already been carried.

Coun. Riley Brockington wants an explanation for how some projects made the list, like the \$550,000 for cycling tracks on Hunt Club Road between Riverside Drive and Paul Benoit Driveway.

The tracks would be welcome additions to River ward, but as far as Brockington is concerned, the project is not high on his constituents' priority list.

"Regardless of how tight the timelines are, council should always be consulted when we're talking about \$300 million in projects," he said.

On that point, there is little room for argument. Having too little time doesn't hold up as an excuse for drafting such an important list in secret. Having too little political will is probably closer to the mark.