

If the federal taps gush money, Ottawa isn't sure what to spend it on



[David Reevely](#)

January 25, 2016

Ottawa Citizen

The city is rushing to put together a list of “shovel-ready” construction projects in case the federal government shows up with a lot of money that has to be spent fast.

The problem: Ottawa, like many other cities, cleared a big backlog of work between 2009 and 2012, the last time the feds decided to shower cash on Canadian municipalities to try to stimulate the economy out of a recession.

The city spent nearly \$400 million in three years on new roads, Transitway improvements, sidewalk repairs and renovations to libraries and recreation centres. They included once-in-a-generation jobs like replacing traffic lights that flash green to tell drivers they can turn left with ones that have green arrows — simple things that can sit on a to-do list for years and years, waiting for money. Once they’re done, they’re done.

In recent election campaigns, the winning Liberals both federally and provincially have promised to spend billions and billions on infrastructure. The city knows that. But now that the economy looks wobbly, top managers want to be ready if Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Premier Kathleen Wynne decide to goose public spending the way Stephen Harper and Dalton McGuinty did seven years ago.

If that happens, they won’t be looking for projects the city wants to do sometime soon. They’ll be looking for projects that are ready to start next week. Those aren’t as easy to find as they used to be.

According to an email that fell into the Citizen’s hands — the second one in a week that a city employee sent to a journalist by mistake — Ottawa’s general manager of public works, Kevin Wylie, met city manager Kent Kirkpatrick Friday afternoon to talk over his department’s “asks.”

Wylie’s subordinates had barely a day to throw their lists together. Send in whatever you have, they were told.

Project manager Kim Perrault came up with 44 new push-button crosswalks (\$725,000 in all), tidying up an intersection in Greely (\$1 million), and roundabouts at Eagleson at Flewellyn roads and Huntmar at Richardson roads (\$3.7 million total). Some of those need some final design work done, and the list of new crosswalk spots isn’t finished, but mainly what’s holding them up is money. There’s almost none put aside for the roundabouts, for instance.

The city has a separate program for small fixes to dangerous streets. It's for "low-cost, high-return measures that provide operational benefits as well as improved safety." There's nothing in that hopper, Perrault wrote.

In 2009, the city's list included upgrading several dozen rural roads, building new sidewalks and bike paths, and repaving worn-out streets. Those totalled tens of millions of dollars, all apart from big Transitway extensions and fixes to community centres and libraries. They did \$2-million worth of new traffic lights alone. The city borrowed to pay for its share; that was a no-brainer, with other levels of government offering to pay for two-thirds of the costs of things they normally wouldn't help with at all, but it wasn't free.

Then, at Mayor Jim Watson's direction, the city followed up with a major construction program of its own called Ottawa on the Move. The idea was to get the capital as ready as possible for the current light-rail work — so commuters wouldn't be jammed up worse than they have to be by closed lanes and rerouted buses — and to spiff the downtown core up as much as possible for tourists in 2017. Since the national stimulus program began in 2009, Ottawa's borrowed more than \$1 billion to finance all this, tripling its net debt.

Trudeau and federal Infrastructure Minister Amarjeet Sohi have said they'll take a broader approach to spending than the federal government did last time by including, for instance, social-housing repairs. Ottawa has a backlog of those the last stimulus program didn't address. So that's something.

But it's a very necessary difference. Last time, we had a bunch of projects we wanted to get done but couldn't afford. Then money fell from the sky, we borrowed some more at rock-bottom interest rates, and we got them done. Now if the moneyclouds open up again, we'll be desperate to find ways to take advantage.