

# Cities ready for ‘immediate stimulative’ projects when cash comes through

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Calgary and Edmonton say there are many small projects that could get started right away should provincial and federal budgets come through with extra infrastructure cash.

Alberta’s two largest cities have also prioritized their wish lists of larger unfunded projects.

With one eye on a provincial government struggling with a major drop in revenue and another on a federal government looking to spend billions on infrastructure projects across the country, Alberta municipalities have a lot riding on budget decisions that will be made over the coming weeks in Edmonton and Ottawa.

Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi said that while larger projects such as light-rail extensions involve years of planning, all municipalities have long lists of basic renovations that could stimulate the economy in 2016 as long as Ottawa and the province act quickly.

“We’re ready with projects that will have immediate stimulative effect,” he said in an interview.

Last year, the city of Calgary released a list of unfunded capital projects worth \$26-billion, including fire-station upgrades, roadwork, several affordable-housing projects and new police labs.

“If there is infrastructure funding, we’re not inventing stuff. We’re not saying, ‘Wouldn’t it be nice to have a bocce ball court in city hall.’ We’re just accelerating stuff that we’ve long known we need,” Mr. Nenshi said.

The mayor will be travelling to Davos, Switzerland, for the World Economic Forum meetings, where he will moderate a discussion called “A New Chapter for Canada,” involving a speech by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and a panel discussion with four federal ministers and three other Canadian leaders, including Royal Bank of Canada president David McKay.

Mr. Nenshi is also part of two other panels at the forum: one asking what defines the soul of a great city and another on fostering innovation in cities, where he will appear alongside the mayors of Paris, Kiev and Seoul as well as the a senior Chinese municipal official.

The federal Liberal government is working on a budget that will provide details on campaign promises to spend \$60-billion in new money on infrastructure, split evenly among public transit, green infrastructure and social infrastructure.

Meanwhile, Edmonton Mayor Don Iveson will chair the big city mayors caucus this year for the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. The big city mayors are expected to meet with federal officials in Ottawa early in February.

Edmonton City Councillor Michael Walters, who is acting mayor while Mr. Iveson is on a trip to China, agreed that there are projects that could begin immediately. He pointed to Edmonton's much-needed sewer repairs as an example of spending that could fall under the green-infrastructure component as adapting to climate change through flood preparedness.

The public-transit funds will take more time to get going. As several Canadian cities, including Toronto and Ottawa, are working on new light-rail lines, Edmonton has some hard lessons to share about the potential problems that come with new transit.

Edmonton's new metro line has faced months of controversy over the fact that the line, like others in the city, crosses road traffic at grade. This strongly irritates residents left idling in their vehicles as they wait for the trains to arrive and cross the road.

"There's no doubt that you should, wherever possible, grade separate rail lines. It's a very obvious statement," Mr. Walters said. "The reason municipalities build light rail at grade at major intersections – there's one reason for it – is that it's too expensive to do it otherwise on the back of the residential and business property taxpayer. You need federal and provincial partnerships. I can wholeheartedly admit the imperfect reality that is light rail crossing over major intersections snarling traffic. I can also wholeheartedly admit that if we had more money to do it properly and separate those intersections, we would have done that."

Alberta, and Edmonton in particular, has the advantage of a federal Infrastructure Minister who has a background in Edmonton as a city councillor and bus driver in Amarjeet Sohi.

"He's as familiar with any of those projects as any of us on council are today," Mr. Walters said. "That is, no question, helpful."