

# Federal infrastructure goals put power in pockets of big-city mayors

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The race is on for access to the billions in federal infrastructure dollars that have been promised by the Liberal government in Ottawa. And it is almost assuredly going to be won by the country's major cities, whose building priorities align with the ecofriendly lens through which the administration of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will judge prospective projects.

In some instances, this could set up a conflict between the desires of Canada's big-city mayors and provincial governments, whose infrastructure agenda may be different. A case in point is British Columbia.

Vancouver's priority is an east-west subway along one of the most congested arterials in the city, a route that would extend out to the University of British Columbia. The burgeoning city of Surrey, which is expected to overtake Vancouver in terms of population in the not-too-distant future, wants to build a light rapid transit system. Both projects are in limbo since last year's transit referendum, in which voters rejected a tax hike to help underwrite the cost of the two initiatives.

The B.C. government has made a new 10-lane bridge linking the southern suburbs of the Metropolitan region to the city of Vancouver its No. 1 infrastructure concern. Construction is supposed to commence next year and Victoria is counting on money from Ottawa to help fund the \$3.5-billion crossing. But an endeavour that will mostly serve to accommodate more vehicles on the road runs contrary to the unwritten mission statement of the federal government's infrastructure program.

Green is good.

Sources tell me that the city of Vancouver has been all but assured it will get a large chunk of federal money for its \$3-billion-plus subway and that Surrey can count on a major cash infusion from Ottawa to help get its \$2-billion-plus light rail system off the ground. This scenario is playing itself out across the country.

In Calgary, Mayor Naheed Nenshi has already put in a request to Amarjeet Sohi, Minister of Infrastructure and Communities, for (among other things) funding to continue predesign work for the Green-Line LRT, a project that will effectively double the city's LRT Network. Those needed federal funds are as good as in the bank.

In a letter sent to Mr. Sohi on Friday and obtained by The Globe and Mail, Mr. Nenshi outlined the way he would like to see the infrastructure funding model work. “We believe the best way to do this is through a block grant program where the government of Canada does not approve individual projects but rather supplies the city with funding accompanied by strict criteria and stringent reporting requirements.” Mr. Sohi is considering this request.

Elsewhere, Mr. Trudeau has already pledged nearly \$2-billion in infrastructure dollars for Toronto’s SmartTrack plan, but there is likely to be an opportunity to help finance extensions of the Crosstown LRT line, as well. In Montreal, Mayor Denis Coderre’s infrastructure wish list is topped by the nearly \$2-billion eastward extension of the subway system’s blue line. (Perhaps the PM will attempt to tie it to Mr. Coderre’s support for Energy East.)

The federal government’s infrastructure program will help accomplish a couple of extremely important things. First, with its heavy emphasis on mass-transit undertakings, it will help boost Mr. Trudeau’s environmental cred. On that front, there are few politicians in the country the Prime Minister admires and respects more for the job he has done in making his city a green leader in the world than Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson, someone who definitely has the ear of the country’s new leader.

But the infrastructure plan will also help bolster the Liberals’ standing in the country’s largest cities, centres that are critical to the party’s political future. The Conservatives were effectively shut out of the country’s largest urban centres in the past election and understand (as do the Liberals) that to regain power they will need to make inroads there.

Under Mr. Trudeau, there is a new dynamic developing between Ottawa and the big-city mayors. In private meetings, the PM has expressed unreserved appreciation for the fact that those charged with running the country’s major metropolises have very few levers at their disposal to raise money for the many jobs facing them. He is sympathetic to the reality that cities receive only eight cents of every tax dollar and yet face infrastructure needs the cost of which they have little ability to cover.

Canada’s major cities are moving to the front of the political line. Mr. Trudeau’s infrastructure plan will demonstrate that mayors have more power than ever before.