

Mayors urge Ottawa to send infrastructure funds directly to cities

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Big-city mayors are calling on Ottawa to bypass the provinces and send new money directly to municipalities to get infrastructure projects started for the impending construction season.

That was one of the messages delivered to Justin Trudeau on Friday in a rare meeting between mayors and the Prime Minister. The gathering provided an opportunity for cities to make their case directly to senior ministers as the federal government works out the details of a \$60-billion infrastructure plan that will be outlined in the coming federal budget.

“Ideally, the funds should flow directly from the federal government to the municipalities. If we have to involve the provinces in another layer of authority, it’s going to slow everything down,” Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi said after the meeting.

Federation of Canadian Municipalities president Raymond Louie said a common message to Ottawa this week was that the new infrastructure program should be set up in a way that money does not fall into a “quagmire” at the provincial level.

Canada’s municipalities are the constitutional responsibility of provincial governments, but federal involvement in local issues has been gradually increasing over the years. Ottawa’s role is poised to grow further with the budget, as the Liberals bring in a multibillion-dollar plan that has a strong municipal focus.

Mayors are clearly encouraging that expanded federal role.

“Cities are no longer just creatures of the provinces,” said Montreal Mayor Denis Coderre, a former federal Liberal cabinet minister.

Mr. Trudeau has the benefit of a provincial and municipal landscape that is politically in line with his priorities. Seven of the 10 provinces are currently led by Liberal governments. The NDP governs in Alberta and Manitoba while the conservative-leaning Saskatchewan Party holds power in Saskatchewan.

At the municipal level, several big-city mayors are former Liberal politicians, either federally or provincially.

That high degree of political alignment across all three levels of government means there is little evidence of discord as premiers and mayors hope for more money in the federal budget.

Mr. Trudeau declined to provide new details Friday as to how his promised infrastructure plans will work. That information is expected to be included in the budget.

The date of the budget has not yet been announced but it is expected to be released in March.

“We are restarting a relationship that had been significantly neglected over the past 10 years, and ensuring that we get the money flowing in a responsible and rapid way is a priority for all of us,” Mr. Trudeau said.

Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson said Canadian cities need more money and power to be competitive internationally.

“Prime Minister Trudeau is breaking down the silos between cities, provinces, federal government and First Nations,” he said. “Canada’s cities compete against cities around the world that have more jurisdiction, more tax revenue to work with. And frankly for us to compete economically, our cities need to have more resources and stronger partnership with the federal government.”

Mr. Robertson said Friday’s meeting was the first time that big-city mayors have met directly with a sitting prime minister since Paul Martin’s government. Finance Minister Bill Morneau also met with the mayors on Friday, one of six cabinet ministers to attend parts of the mayors’ two days of meetings in Ottawa focused on the federal budget.

Toronto Mayor John Tory said social housing and transit are top of mind for his city.

“Those are two things we can move ahead with very quickly and I believe the government is going to respond to that,” he said.

“We don’t have time any more to take years and years to sort of argue about the details of these programs. We should have the money go out responsibly, but there are things we have in Toronto ready to go and those are things that we should get on with. And the same is true in other cities so we can put people to work and get the infrastructure fixed.”

In Edmonton, Families, Children and Social Development Minister Jean Yves-Duclos met with provincial and territorial ministers responsible for social services. That meeting covered some of the same topics as Mr. Trudeau’s discussions with mayors, including affordable housing.