

Ottawa lagging on infrastructure spending: Quebec

[Bill Curry](#)

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Quebec is expressing frustration that federal bureaucrats are holding up the flow of new infrastructure dollars, warning it is unlikely that Ottawa's new budget cash will enter the economy this year.

A meeting between Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard is currently in the works in an effort to help speed up the process of approving projects.

The meeting is expected to include a discussion of Quebec's major new infrastructure proposal for a \$5.5-billion light rail line in Montreal that would be partly funded by Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec, the province's pension fund.

In an interview with The Globe and Mail, Quebec's minister responsible for Canadian relations, Jean-Marc Fournier, said talks between the two governments are generally going well but he questioned why federal officials insist on renegotiating programs in areas like waste-water infrastructure when similar deals had already been signed under the Conservatives.

“When we sit with the political representatives, we all want to start the construction very, very quickly. We have some problems when, after that, the civil servants put that on paper. We find that sometimes they are adding conditions, new conditions, starting all over again and we've got to make the political contact again and say ‘Come on. What's happening?’ ” he said.

Mr. Fournier said the pace of discussions would suggest that much of the new federal infrastructure spending won't start until next year.

“If something happens in 2016 it will be because of provincial infrastructure programs,” he said.

Quebec's Finance Minister Carlos Leitao is Ottawa's primary contact in the province on infrastructure negotiations but Mr. Leitao's office declined an interview request, suggesting that Mr. Fournier could speak publicly on the issue.

Mr. Fournier's comments come as municipal leaders from across the country are gathered in Winnipeg for a meeting of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

Mr. Trudeau is scheduled to address the FCM Friday morning. The government's March budget projected that new spending and tax cuts would raise the level of real gross domestic product by 0.5 per cent in the first year and by 1 per cent in the second year.

Kate Monfette, a spokeswoman for federal Infrastructure Minister Amarjeet Sohi, insisted that talks are going well and announcements are in the works.

"In the next few weeks, we expect to have a number of significant announcements in Quebec and we are working closely with our counterpart Minister Leitao for the new funds and we hope to finalize that agreement with a project list in the near future," she said in an e-mail.

Earlier this week, Julie Gelfand, the federal Environment Commissioner, who operates as part of the Auditor General's office, criticized Infrastructure Canada for not doing enough to track the results that have been achieved through infrastructure programs such as the federal gas tax transfer.

Conservative MP and former infrastructure minister Denis Lebel defended his former department, noting that officials are under pressure to act quickly but must also follow the rules.

"You have a politician telling them that it's not going fast enough and they are asking too many questions and you have the Auditor General saying to them you don't ask enough. It's really not easy to balance that," he said.

Mr. Lebel noted that Mr. Fournier was an adviser to former federal Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff.

"He [Mr. Fournier] will not say that Liberal politicians are doing wrong," Mr. Lebel said. "I worked very well with the Infrastructure Canada team. ... I've never seen them blocking projects."

Mr. Lebel said that while the Liberals promised to run deficits in order to spend on infrastructure, he's concerned that the government ran a \$9.4-billion deficit in March alone with no evidence that it was spent on infrastructure.

"They have promised a lot," he said. "They are not doing what they have said and that will get worse in the future, I'm sure of that."