

Spin social benefits off infrastructure work

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Inside Ottawa Valley

OTTAWA — The infrastructure minister is looking to take an idea from a rookie MP and require federally funded infrastructure projects to create social benefits on top of the economic spinoffs tied to billions in new spending.

A private member's bill from Liberal MP Ahmed Hussen would, if passed, require bidders on federal projects to show they will create jobs or training opportunities in the communities where work is done.

The bill as written would cover the \$3.4 billion promised in work on federally owned infrastructure over the next five years, but miss out on billions more destined for provinces and cities that own the majority of the country's infrastructure, such as roads, bridges and water treatment plants.

Infrastructure Minister Amarjeet Sohi said this week that he has floated the idea to cities and provinces to have these community benefit agreements become part of the Liberals' new infrastructure program, which is doling out \$6.6 billion this year and next, part of \$60 billion in new spending promised over the next 10 years.

Sohi said provincial and municipal leaders have shown an interest in the idea during preliminary discussions.

The details are likely to be worked out as part of negotiations over funding agreements with provinces that will guide how money is spent.

"The idea is to spread the benefits and to ensure the community benefits from infrastructure along with the broader benefits of the infrastructure and ... build complete communities," Sohi said in an interview Wednesday with The Canadian Press.

Sohi will be in Toronto on Friday to meet stakeholders and hear more about community benefits at a roundtable hosted by Hussen.

Community benefit agreements have been used for years in the United States and were applied to the construction of the athletes' village for the Vancouver Olympics. The agreements require projects to hire locally or create jobs for groups facing high unemployment rates, such as young people and aboriginals.

The agreements are usually negotiated among private companies doing work, the public body funding the project and community groups like unions, faith-based groups or social services.

Last year, Ontario became the first province to weave community benefits into the \$130 billion promised over the next 10 years for provincial infrastructure projects.

Hussen said the provincial decision, coupled with the interest from the federal minister, could be the leverage that proponents of community benefit agreements need to push the idea to other corners of the country.

"This is a way to focus federally funded projects to say why can't we demand from contractors when they're bidding for projects to show community benefits emanating from this project, above and beyond the project, and make that part of the bidding process," Hussen said.

Hussen said not every project is suitable for a benefit agreement.

Nor is every benefit simply mean more jobs or training, he said. The benefits agreement could include provisions for community housing.

His bill goes to second reading in the House of Commons on May 11.

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