

Federal government, B.C., municipalities to pump \$450 million into water treatment



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‘In my mind infrastructure is about building communities, it is about providing a quality of life for citizens,’ says federal Infrastructure Minister Amarjeet Sohi. ‘This is not about partisanship. This is not about us focusing where our seats are.’ Adrian Wyld / THE CANADIAN PRESS Files

OTTAWA — The federal and B.C. governments will announce in Victoria today the creation of a \$450.1-million fund to help municipalities invest in water and wastewater treatment facilities across B.C., Postmedia has learned.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s government, which earlier this year announced the planned doubling of infrastructure funding to \$120 billion over 10 years, is putting up half that amount, or \$225 million, Infrastructure Minister Amarjeet Sohi said in an interview Thursday.

The B.C. government is contributing \$148.5 million, or about one-third of the total, while municipalities are covering the remaining \$76.6 million.

Sohi, who is attending the annual gathering of the Union of B.C. Municipalities in Victoria, will be flanked by Todd Stone, B.C.’s minister of transportation and infrastructure, and Peter Fassbender, the minister responsible for TransLink.

“The federal government has recognized that water and wastewater is a huge issue right across the country,” Fassbender said in an interview Thursday after confirming Victoria’s contribution to the fund.

“We have lot of pent-up demand, there are a lot of communities with aging infrastructure and boiled-water advisories.”

The ministers will release an initial list of 35 approved projects totalling \$72 million, with most being relatively small initiatives far from Metro Vancouver, where the Liberals won the vast majority of their 17 B.C. seats.



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Projects include replacing a water tower in Burns Lake and upgrading water treatment facilities in Dawson Creek and Parksville. Work for most is expected to start either later this year or in early 2017.

Sohi said Ottawa is not showing regional favouritism as it works with the province and municipalities in determining priorities.

“In my mind infrastructure is about building communities, it is about providing a quality of life for citizens,” said Sohi, a soft-spoken former Edmonton bus driver, city councillor and amateur actor.

“This is not about partisanship. This is not about us focusing where our seats are.”

The \$225-million share comes out of a \$2-billion fund announced in the 2016 federal budget. B.C.’s slice represents a little over 11 per cent of national total, even though B.C. has about 13 per cent of the country’s population.

However, officials note that the province received a special additional allocation of \$212 million in the 2016 budget to fund one-third of the Lions Gate Wastewater Treatment Plant project, a top priority of Metro Vancouver mayors.

B.C. was the last province to sign a wastewater deal with the federal government, though it was the first earlier this year to strike an accord on the other component of Ottawa’s infrastructure plan.

The federal government announced in June it was handing over \$460 million to B.C. to fund a variety of transit projects, the majority in Metro Vancouver.

That amount represents 13.6 per cent of the \$3.4 billion Ottawa allocated for transit in the 2016 budget. Funds were allocated based on total public transit ridership rather than by a province's share of the population, resulting in B.C., Ontario and Quebec getting slightly higher transfers.

The Trudeau government's 2017 budget is to reveal details on the second phase of the 10-year infrastructure plan.

In the House of Commons Thursday, Conservative MP Dianne Watts accused the Liberals of potentially stalling funding by passing a motion this week requiring a climate change impact analysis for every infrastructure project proposal.

"The motion means that all federal infrastructure projects are now on hold until they go through a not yet established analysis, and jobs that Canadians desperately need are not going to be created," said the former Surrey mayor.

But Sohi said Canadians shouldn't expect delays in the flow of money from the federal treasury to buy buses, rebuild roads and fix waste-treatment plants.

"I am proud to say that we have approved more funding in the last year than the previous government did in five years combined," Sohi said.

"We have approved 700 projects, and 60 per cent of those projects are currently under way, thus creating jobs and opportunities for Canadians."

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