

# Windsor ready to pounce on promised federal infrastructure dollars



[Doug Schmidt, Windsor Star](#)

February 18, 2016 |

They're dusting off and updating their to-do lists at Windsor city hall in response to Ottawa's promise to share billions of dollars with the municipalities so they can tackle their big backlog in infrastructure maintenance.

"We have projects ready to go on the shelf — we're poised to react in a positive way whenever that announcement might come," said city engineer Mark Winterton.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the federal Liberals will unveil their first budget next month, but they've strongly hinted this year's spending will go into the red in order to nearly double the amount usually devoted to public infrastructure investments. One of the aims of the big spend — about \$125 billion over 10 years — is to stimulate Canada's lethargic economy.

Even with a total capital budget this year of about \$75 million and a five-year plan of funded capital improvement allocations, Windsor has a massive "infrastructure deficit" in unfunded needs, whether in roads, sewers or facilities.

"We have endless lists of things we can do ... our roads deficit alone is over \$300 million," said Winterton.

Keen on getting projects started as early as this construction season, the Liberals are expected to keep the initial focus on things that can be done right away, such as fixing social housing, upgrading transit fleets and replacing old sewers. Finance Canada estimates every dollar spent on infrastructure increases economic growth by \$1.50, with long-term positive impacts to follow.

As part of its regular budget, Windsor Essex Community Housing Corporation got \$2.7 million this year for capital projects, but the agency has an estimated capital needs deficit of \$62 million, said Debbie Cercone, Windsor's executive director of housing and children's services.

Any new money coming in, and "we'll be doing a happy dance here," she said.

On the heels of the recent recession, when the previous Conservative government last opened Ottawa's stimulus spending taps, Windsor was among the top recipients of per capita grants from the federal and provincial governments.

Mayor Drew Dilkens, who was a councillor at the time, said Windsor had Canada's highest unemployment rate, it had plenty of shovel-ready plans in place and it had two senior cabinet ministers in the provincial government, including the finance minister.

The strong political representation in government is now gone, but Windsor still boasts the highest jobless rate in the country, and it has a new batch of infrastructure plans.

"I think it would be hard to ignore Windsor-Essex," said Dilkens.

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities has been pushing for Ottawa to pick up more of the municipalities' share in any new funding arrangement. But even if the new funding formula is the same as the last time — with local, provincial and federal governments each sharing a third of the cost of every approved project — Dilkens said Windsor would be happy.

"No problem — if you've got the money, we've got the projects," he said. "It's good news anytime someone comes to the table and offers 67 cents on the dollar."

Ward 8 Coun. Bill Marra, a past FCM executive member, said it makes sense for the federal government to apply a "pro-rated funding formula." Marra likes Ottawa's promise to look at the nation's stock of old buses, pointing to Transit Windsor's older-than-average fleet.

For Dilkens, three of his top-priority — yet still unfunded — projects would be the extension of Lauzon Parkway to Highway 401 and the expansion of County Road 42 (at an estimated cost of \$200 million), as well as the "Dougall Box," which includes widening of a narrow section of arterial roadway connecting South Windsor to the core (estimated cost: up to \$70 million).

"And a big one would be social housing," Dilkens added.

Kirk Whittal, chief operating officer with WECHC, said the \$2.7 million in capital funding provided yearly is largely limited to urgent repairs and to cover safety and regulatory requirements. It doesn't cover what he calls "liveability" improvements, including upgrades that would result in big savings in ongoing utilities costs, which currently eat up about a quarter of the agency's budget.

Some of Windsor's social housing stock is six decades old. A special program several years ago covered new windows for an 80-unit highrise at Glengarry Court, at a cost of about \$1 million. The WECHC manages 4,708 units, with an average building age of more than 40 years.

The big question remains over what criteria Ottawa will set for access to the new funding.

Dilkens said the local funding component will be found, including, if necessary, by pushing already approved projects onto the back-burner.

When it comes to needed infrastructure spending in which the local municipality provides 33 cents or less on the dollar, "we'll find a way," said Windsor's mayor.

