


 search
[About COCA](#)
[Membership](#)
[Issues & Advocacy](#)
[News & Events](#)
[Resources](#)
[Careers](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[Home](#) >> [News & Events](#) >> [COCA Monthly Newsletter](#) >> [COCA Newsletter, April 2009](#)

COCA Newsletter, April 2009

 Text size: [A](#) [A](#) [A](#)

As Ottawa fiddles, Ontario continues to crumble

Ten weeks ago the federal government, to much fanfare trumpeted help was on the way for the Canadian, and by extension Ontario, economies ravaged by the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. Forming the heart of the defense would be more than \$30 billion in stimulus spending targeted specifically at public infrastructure projects, \$17 billion for 2009 and \$13 billion for 2010. Wisely, Ottawa explained funding for any projects would have to be timely, targeted and transparent, ensuring the maximum value was redeemed for our hard-earned tax dollars. The only catch, that is now becoming more evident with each passing day, is the 2 year time limit by which this money has to be spent - that means projects identified, clearances put in place work started and completed.

On the surface this condition does not seem unreasonable. Good business planning would posit that any stimulus investments should be made when they are actually needed. Given current economic conditions, two years is a fairly accurate timeframe, however, the federal government has no intention of offering any sort of plan for infrastructure matching funds until at least June. Staff from the Privy Council Office last week told the Commons Committee on Government Operations and Estimates that it was too soon to commit federal funds as not all provinces have finalized their own project commitments. Such an "all in" position looks increasingly like a stall tactic to avoid having to make good on its pledge with each passing day.

To its credit, the Ontario government committed the evening of the federal budget last January to come up with its \$5.4 billion share of monies for infrastructure in order to get federal infrastructure stimulus funds flowing into our economy as soon as possible. Two weeks ago the 2009 Ontario budget detailed \$32.5 billion in infrastructure spending over the next two years, with heavy emphasis on roads, education and health care projects. The decision to save construction jobs and improve core infrastructure lies at Ottawa's feet. All it has to do is honour its pledge.

GVCA Wins CCA Member Association Award of Excellence

The Grand Valley Construction Association, under the leadership of Martha George was named the 2009 recipient of the prestigious Canadian Construction Association (CCA) Member Association Award of Excellence at the CCA's 91st Annual Conference in Scottsdale Arizona. The award is presented to a member association that has shown outstanding leadership in all of the following areas:

- Industry enhancement,
- Education, and
- Membership recruitment programs.

GVCA was recognized for lobbying efforts, its emphasis on providing educational sessions to members, launching a *Women in Construction* group offering women in the industry more educational and leadership opportunities, introducing a new Web site, Black Berry tailored electronic communications and in house safety training.

Congratulations to the GVCA and keep up the good work!

P&P Committee Holds Inaugural Meeting

At its inaugural meeting on April 6, COCA's Policy and Priorities Committee discussed a wide range of public policy issues that impact on the construction industry. The Committee recommended that COCA continue to support the Construction Industry WSIB Task Force and its effective policy development and advocacy work on WSIB issues and that COCA undertake to assume the role of Secretariat for the Task Force. The amendments to the Construction Lien Act that are being proposed by a broad coalition of construction industry stakeholders was identified as COCA's top priority at the present time. The Committee also determined that COCA should continue to be involved in the Ministry of Finance's annual processes around the development of the Provincial budget.

Other high priority issues for further discussion included the Agreement on Internal Trade, getting federal provincial infrastructure funding flowing and the creation of the College of Trades. The issue of GST-PST harmonization was discussed and much to everyone's surprise the recent Ontario budget appears to have made harmonization a "done deal"; the Committee recommended COCA provide information/education to its members on this matter to help ease transition to HST.

The Committee will meet again on April 30 for further discussions and it is anticipated new committees and task forces will be struck at that time.

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Representative or Competency Based Boards of Directors?

Representative or competency based Board of Directors? This question has arisen many times in the last 6 months, in discussions about the composition of the WSIB's Board of Directors, regarding the make-up of the soon to be consolidated safe workplace associations and in conversations about who should sit around the Board table at COCA.

Contemporary governance thinking about Board composition suggests that Boards should be populated with individuals who collectively have the requisite skills, abilities, experiences and networks to perform the work of Boards of Directors. After all, the work of Boards of Directors is very different from operational work; it is more strategic, more analytical, perhaps more intellectual. It requires individuals who can think conceptually at the hundred thousand foot level. Boards of Directors are also charged with the important responsibility of holding management accountable for results, so Directors must be analytical and be able to challenge the assertions and recommendations of management. In addition, Boards serve as trustees of the organization's finances, so all Board members should possess the ability to read and understand financial statements and those who serve on the audit committee should have advanced qualifications in this area. Boards will always have the ability to hire outside consultants with specialized expertise that may be required from time to time, but the current best practice is to populate the Board in such a way to ensure that the competencies that are needed on a meeting to meeting basis are resident on the Board.

On the other hand, proponents of a representative Board model insist that Boards will work best when they are populated with individuals who represent all the various constituencies within an organization. This ensures that all perspectives and points of view are aired around the Board table and that the Board fully understands and appreciates the views of the people/firms/industries they have the privilege of serving. Our municipal, provincial and federal governments are based on the representative model and members are elected to serve geographic wards and ridings. The Board of COCA is representative as every member organization has the ability to appoint a representative to COCA's Board of Directors.

In the best of all worlds, perhaps competent individuals can be selected from an organization's various constituencies to provide all the skills, abilities, experiences and networks that are needed to do the Board's work on a meeting to meeting basis.

Value of ICI building permits continue to slide in February

The value of Canadian ICI building permits fell 15.9% to \$3.7 billion in February, led by a big decline in the Ontario non-residential sector. The decline is significantly larger than the 3.5 to 4% that had been predicted by economists.

Nationally, non-residential permits dropped by 30.5% to \$1.6 billion.

Institutional building permit values fell 56.4% to \$363 million, following a 64.2% decline in January; Commercial permits dropped 20.4% to \$972 million; and Industrial permits rebounded from a 50.8% drop in January to see a gain of 14.3% to \$236 million.

Looking ahead to the rest of the year the value of institutional permits are expected to increase, offering the industry a ray of hope, as federal and provincial infrastructure stimulus plans come online.

WSIB Task Force Update

The Construction Industry WSIB Task Force has accomplished a great deal in the four months since its formation. The WSIB has taken notice of the ire of construction industry employers, in aggregate its largest financial contributor and regular lines of communication with both the chair and senior management at the WSIB have been opened. The Task Force will be meeting with Mr. Mahoney on April 21st for briefings on the financial state of the WSIB and its investment position, on the efficiency of WSIB operations and on the success of its prevention initiatives including the consolidation of the safe workplace associations. At that time, the Task Force will have an opportunity to present its views on the WSIB and to make recommendations and the preparation of that presentation is well underway.

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