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OTTAWA - Transport Minister John Baird says he'd like to eliminate federal environmental assessments for "green" infrastructure projects such as public transit or waste-water treatment plants.

Baird will meet Thursday in Ottawa with the mayors of 22 of Canada's biggest cities, where he'll make a pitch for cutting government red tape in a bid to speed up economy-stimulating infrastructure spending.

"We have a lot of rules in place to stop bad things from happening," the former environment minister said in an interview Tuesday.

"We don't have anything to help good things happen."

Baird said his priority for the meeting will be identifying new projects that can get underway in 2009 or 2010: "What projects are out there that are new - that wouldn't normally be scheduled to be done over the next two years - that would be what we'd call 'shovel ready.' "

But the NDP warned that the Conservative government will be in for a battle if it tries to strip down federal environmental laws.

MP Thomas Mulcair said that while going after shovel-ready projects is a smart plan, "that doesn't mean shoving aside environmental regulations."

Some provincial premiers however - including Manitoba NDP Premier Gary Doer - have called for streamlining environmental assessments to avoid duplication between federal and provincial processes. Premiers plan to raise the issue Friday at their meeting with Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

The federal government has already committed \$33 billion for infrastructure spending over seven years, with the possibility of more in a federal budget to be released Jan. 27.

With the economy heading into recession, federal officials, premiers and municipal mayors are seeking ways to get infrastructure projects off the drawing board and creating jobs as quickly as possible.

Baird said he'd like to push ahead with plans for cutting red tape that will make for a shorter lag time between a federal funding commitment and a given construction project getting underway.

He cited both the Navigable Waters Act and mandatory environmental assessments as areas that need attention.

Whether Ottawa provides one dollar or a billion for a targeted infrastructure project, it triggers a federal environmental assessment, said Baird.

But if Ottawa provides gas-tax dollars to provinces, who will use it for the same project, it does not trigger a federal assessment. Nor does base infrastructure funding provided to the provinces.

"We're going to look to see what we can do to streamline that."

Major new projects, such as mines, dams or oil sands developments, will require environmental assessments, said the minister. But he cited waste-water treatment plants or public transit as the kind of environmentally friendly projects that should not be slowed down by such reviews.

Baird also criticized the Navigable Waters Act, which dates to the 1870s.

The act, he said, requires government officials to "put a canoe in a creek or large puddle" to find out whether it is navigable. The legislation applies equally to ocean projects, major rivers or pastoral streams.

"It puts a huge delay on projects."

The suggestion didn't go over well with the Green party.

"Mr. Baird should realize that small waterways are a crucial piece of habitat for many wild creatures and are deserving of protection," Adrienne Carr, the party's deputy leader, said in a release.