

Ottawa seeking to speed up process for works projects

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OTTAWA — Ottawa is moving to speed up the process for building roads, bridges and other job-rich public-works projects - pledging to slim down excessive environmental requirements and asking provinces to supplement construction that would help native Canadians.

Both issues are expected to be discussed this week when Prime Minister Stephen Harper meets with premiers as well as territorial and native leaders. The measures are being planned for the crucial budget of Jan. 27, when Ottawa will fight economic downturn by running a deep deficit and doling out up to \$30-billion in stimulus spending.

The federal government has been consulting widely with the provinces over the past few weeks to find what the bureaucracy has called "shovel-ready" projects that can be started quickly in an effort to soften the downturn's impact.

Two provincial sources have told The Globe and Mail that the provinces want to see Ottawa cut some of the procedures when it comes to environmental assessments that must be done before projects are begun. Often, federal and provincial governments each conduct their own environmental studies before a project can be started. But the desperate need to get the work going has compelled discussion on ways to reduce environmental preparation.

Infrastructure Minister John Baird acknowledged in an interview yesterday that he is looking at removing redundant regulation.

"There's a real hodge-podge of environmental assessment requirements - of overlap and duplication," he told The Globe and Mail. "Many of them are just duplicating what's done at the provincial level."

Federal sources added that they have asked the provinces to supplement work on native reserves with provincial projects. Ottawa has a long list of schools, treatment plants, multipurpose facilities and other projects that could be built on reserves across the country, reducing the huge unemployment rate in those areas.

However, because reserves are on federal land, provinces are reluctant to take part. Nonetheless, Ottawa is asking them to spend money in related areas. For example, if the federal government were to construct a water treatment plant on a reserve, it might ask

the provincial government to pay for water lines that are connected to a neighbouring town.

"I think [Finance Minister Jim] Flaherty's worst fear is that we will put a whole bunch of money on the table on Jan. 27 and the provinces can ease off," a federal source said. "There's a real premium on partnership here."

Although premiers such as Ontario's Dalton McGuinty are said to be against the idea, others, including British Columbia's Gordon Campbell and Saskatchewan's Brad Wall, like the notion. Ottawa hopes the latter make their voices heard at this week's meeting.

Mr. Baird said streamlining environmental assessments is one of several changes Ottawa is mulling, adding that rewriting laws is another.

He said, for example, that the Navigable Waters Protection Act as currently written is an example of outdated legislation that can hamper public works.

"We got an earful wherever we went from British Columbia to Nova Scotia on that," he said.