

Pallister makes \$1-B promise

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Published January 20, 2016

Progressive Conservative Leader Brian Pallister has joined a growing list of political leaders pledging to spend big bucks on roads, sewers and bridges.

The Manitoba Opposition leader unveiled his party's plan for what he termed "guaranteed strategic infrastructure investment" at a breakfast meeting with members of the Manitoba Heavy Construction Association (MHCA) and the Manitoba Home Builders' Association (MHBA).

The plan calls for a PC government to spend an average of at least \$1 billion per year during its first term in office on infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, drainage and sewers.

He said during a later scrum with reporters that's more than the current NDP government has spent over the last four years, although he didn't specify exactly how much more.

Pallister is the latest prominent political leader to outline his party's longer-term infrastructure spending plans.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has promised to spend \$60 billion over the next 10 years on public transit, green projects and social infrastructure such as affordable housing. That includes \$17.4 billion during its first term in government.

In November's throne speech, Manitoba Premier Greg Selinger promised billions more in long-term infrastructure spending, including a five-year program for the City of Winnipeg that would provide \$1 billion for projects as roads, transit, waste-water treatment facilities and recreation centres.

He also pledged to extend his government's multibillion-dollar infrastructure program by three years, to beyond 2020, at a cost of \$10 billion.

Manitoba Liberal Leader Rana Bokhari has pledged to direct all revenue from the Selinger government's PST increase of one percentage point to a dedicated municipal infrastructure fund.

Her party also would rebate the \$25 million in PST municipalities pay on goods and services. That promise would be phased in over five years, starting with \$5 million the first year and \$10 million the next.

Bokhari also promised to focus infrastructure spending on priority projects agreed to by the province and municipalities.

Pallister also pledged Tuesday to consult with municipalities and construction industry officials before deciding which projects to fund. His government also would institute return on investment as part of the criteria in choosing projects for its five- and 10-year infrastructure investment plans.

"Not everything on the wish list can or should be built," he added.

"The key is to get maximum dollar value out of our infrastructure investments in the future."

Pallister said the PC government would also stick to its infrastructure spending plans so the construction industry knows what to expect each year - something MHCA President Chris Lorenc said would be welcomed.

“Predictability is very important. It doesn’t matter whether it’s industry or government,” he said.

Pallister noted the Selinger government underspent its infrastructure budget by an average of 28 per cent in every year of its last term except in the year leading up to the election.

The PC leader also repeated earlier promises to eventually balance the provincial budget, to protect and improve front-line services such as health and education, to not raise taxes, and to roll back the one per cent PST increase the Selinger government is using to help fund its record spending on infrastructure.

Asked how he plans to accomplish all of that, he said one of the ways will be by reducing government waste. He reiterated an earlier commitment to conduct a complete performance review of government operations to identify where money is being wasted because of overlap and duplication.

“There is waste in all governments,” he said, and any savings found would be reinvested in things such as infrastructure, education and training.

Selinger and Bokhari are scheduled to address the MHCA and the MHBA in the next five weeks.