



Conflict over funding between Mayor Brian Bowman and Premier Brian Pallister has derailed necessary planning on infrastructure investment. JOE BRYKSA / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS



Don Leitch is president of the Business Council of Manitoba.



MANITOBA'S INFRASTRUCTURE MALAISE

INVESTORS NEED TO SEE INVESTMENT STRATEGY, NOT SQUABBLING AND FUNDS LEFT ON THE TABLE

BY DON LEITCH

WE NEED INVESTORS TO REGARD MANITOBA AS A LOCATION FOR INVESTMENT AND JOB CREATION... THEY READ THE NEWSPAPERS. THEY SEE THE STORIES THAT MANITOBA HAS AN INFRASTRUCTURE DEFICIT AND IS UNABLE TO DELIVER INFRASTRUCTURE PROGRAMMING WHEN FUNDS ARE AVAILABLE.

What's happening with our infrastructure? I'm talking about what we spend on highways, road, bridges and transportation.

Investments by the Winnipeg Airport Authority, the private sector investments at CentrePort, and the reconstruction of the Churchill rail line are among the few positive activities along with some targeted investments sprinkled about. Sadly, the positives are eclipsed by the negative stories on infrastructure.

Most discussion on infrastructure seems to be centred on conflict; between levels of government, federal-provincial or between the province and the City of Winnipeg.

A malaise has settled in. Basic infrastructure investments to support daily activities to move people and goods and support business activities are not happening.

An infrastructure deficit has existed for years with inadequate investments in new infrastructure and in maintaining existing infrastructure. Dozens of provincial bridges are reaching and surpassing their expected lifespans. Economic growth is impaired.

Infrastructure in our cities and towns has deteriorated. Local governments have made efforts but an infrastructure deficit remains. The populations of Winnipeg and several other communities are growing and with that growth, the demand for more housing and infrastructure to support it.

The federal government has committed significant funds to provinces and local governments through the national infrastructure program. What is alarming is the reported \$1.9 billion in federal funding earmarked for Manitoba and local governments that is not being taken up when we have a crying demand for infrastructure investment.

The Manitoba government is admirably steadfast in its efforts to reduce the deficit

and deliver promised tax cuts with a deficit-reduction strategy in place.

What is missing is a provincial infrastructure investment strategy, including a plan to utilize federal funds to our advantage. The lack of a strategy restrains our ability to take advantage of those funds and to better position our province for growth and prosperity.

Without a common strategy public political squabbles have become the norm that is now beginning to define our province. News travels beyond our borders. Political disagreements and our inability to deliver infrastructure investments are affecting our reputation. Critical infrastructure investments are not happening.

We need investors to regard Manitoba as a location for investment and job creation. We have much to offer, but what impression do we leave when investors are doing their homework? They read the newspapers. They see the stories that Manitoba has an infrastructure deficit and is unable to deliver infrastructure programming when funds are available. They may look but they cannot find Manitoba's infrastructure strategy.

Sadly Manitoba does not have a strategic infrastructure plan or vision for the province. An economic strategy is slowly emerging but no infrastructure strategy.

The Business Council of Manitoba and others have stressed the importance of having a common strategic vision that provides certainty to the private sector that there will be investments in infrastructure.

Regrettably that vision for infrastructure in Manitoba is no closer today that it was last year. Citizens do not want to bother with who is right and who is wrong and who owes what. They want our roads fixed, new roads and bridges where they are needed, and investments in our sewer and water capacity.

Public differences of opinion and squabbles put the spotlight on the fact that there is no

investment strategy for infrastructure. We know there is a plan to reduce the deficit. But we do not have a plan for infrastructure investment and how it will facilitate economic growth.

In its pre-budget submission to the Minister of Finance, the Business Council once again advocated a comprehensive provincial infrastructure investment strategy including:

- Investment in strategic infrastructure that supports and contributes to growth through investments in trade-related infrastructure throughout Manitoba;
- Investment in community infrastructure including education to train our future talent; and
- Investment in community assets including arts and culture supports Manitobans, adds to our tourism product and contributes to our economy.

It is essential businesses understand the long-term vision, and the long-term expenditure plan of the provincial government when it comes to infrastructure. The two must work hand in hand. The private sector working with the provincial government is a good thing. The Business Council committed to participating in developing a long-term strategy for investments based on stable and predictable funding, innovation and incorporation of technology and community sustainability. The end goal is improving Manitoba's infrastructure and increasing our prosperity.

The Council also advocated that the government adopt and commit to multi-year funding for infrastructure. There is permanent funding for healthcare, for education, for public safety. A similar model of multi-year infrastructure funding should exist.

With a strategic plan and committed investments perhaps we can grow the economy and avoid the squabbles that now define the state of infrastructure in Manitoba. »»»