

Speech in the House of Commons on Northern Infrastructure

February 26, 2013

Dennis Bevington Member of Parliament:

Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to have an opportunity to speak to this tremendous resolution that has been brought forward by our member for **Trinity-Spadina**.

When we talk about infrastructure, most Canadians, depending on where they live, think of the needs of big cities. However, Canada's rural and remote municipalities have infrastructure needs just as great as, or greater than, those faced by cities like Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, but are quite clearly without the same political leverage or resources needed to accomplish those things.

As a member from one of the most remote parts of Canada, a former long-term mayor and the president of the NWT Association of Communities, I know just how great the infrastructure challenge is to northern communities. It is composed of a number of different things.

Appearing before the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs in 2009, David Austin, representing the Association of Yukon Communities, stated:

...we need to recognize that it is not possible to construct infrastructure in Yukon at costs approximating those of southern centres. The shortness of the season and the lack of skilled trades people in some specific trades are factors. The distance from major markets...transportation costs for materials and economies of scale are difficult to achieve in the Yukon's relatively small economy.

His comments can be applied to the rest of the north: to the northern territories, to the northern aboriginal communities across the country and to northern parts of all the provinces. Probably 300 communities across Canada could be called rural and remote.

Yellowknife, the capital of the Northwest Territories, currently has a well-documented infrastructure deficit of approximately \$67 million, meaning that there is this much infrastructure that is in dire need of replacement.

We live in a very difficult environment where the costs are high and where replacement becomes necessary because of climate change and the nature of where we are living.

Yellowknife mayor Mark Heyck recently stated:

...I believe we need to invest more in maintaining our municipal infrastructure than we have in the past, and we need to carefully prioritize our capital projects to put more emphasis on critical infrastructure....

We are not talking about things that are just for the sake of esthetics or simple things like that, but things that are absolutely required to run a small city.

He went on to say:

We also need to be active in territorial and national lobbying efforts through the NWT Association of Communities and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities to ensure the territorial and federal governments are adequately assisting municipalities with the cost of addressing our infrastructure deficit.

Just as Yellowknife probably helps out the rest of the country with its great mining industry located there, with the value per capita of the gross domestic product so high, right across northern Canada we are expected to be shouldering the burden of the GDP in this country to a greater extent than any other part of the country. We need to have proper infrastructure to accomplish that.

The 2008-2012 business plan of the Northwest Territories Department of Public Works and Services is even more direct about the infrastructure needs in the territories. It stated:

The fiscal reality is that the GNWT's infrastructure needs exceed, by a wide margin, its financial ability to address them. Therefore, the GNWT is challenged to explore broad and innovative approaches to infrastructure planning, acquisition, usage and maintenance.

The only trouble is innovation can only go so far, meaning that we simply need to invest.

To meet the NWT's infrastructure need, the territorial government has had to borrow. Because of the borrowing limitations imposed by Ottawa, it ran into serious difficulties.

The NWT Minister of Finance stated in this year's territorial budget address a week or so ago:

...every dollar spent on infrastructure is borrowed money, bringing us closer to our borrowing limit and leaving no flexibility to respond to a potential economic downturn or make strategic investments to support economic development and grow our economy.

Therefore, the NWT is in a robbing Peter to pay Paul situation, and the future is not well taken care of.

In Nunavut, the infrastructure deficit is just as great. The Nunavut government estimates that it will require \$6 billion over the next 20 years to meet its existing infrastructure needs.

It has a need for 3,600 more housing units. It needs a deep water port at Iqaluit and other communities. We had a tremendous presentation this morning at the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development on the incredible lack of transportation infrastructure in Nunavut.

Nunavut needs to find alternate sources of energy. It is currently using 33.4 million litres of diesel for electrical generation. That is unaffordable to that area and will continue to be unaffordable for the future.

Iqaluit, a city of 7,000 people, has a \$160 million infrastructure deficit. They may be able to scrape together, as the mayor said, the \$20 million for badly needed upgrades, but they cannot even come close to addressing the issues that are in front of them.

Earlier this month, the Premier of Nunavut was here in Ottawa lobbying for \$500 million over five years for only two projects. That did not go very far. Those are the kinds of situations our communities and our governments across northern Canada are in.

We are expected to be the economic generators of the future, but the investment has to be made now.

It is unfortunate that politics comes into infrastructure investment. We need a clear strategy to move Canadian infrastructure into the 21st century. I served for five years on the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' green municipal fund investment, and there was an opportunity across the country to identify good investments that made sense for the environment and made sense for the long-term costs to communities.

That information is still available through this great organization, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. We can make a difference with our infrastructure, but we have to take the proper steps.

Improving infrastructure is more than just roads, more than ditches and dumps, more than those things. It is setting our communities up so that they can move to a green future.

That is really important. When we invest in something that is not sustainable, that investment hangs around for 40 years making trouble, so we do need to be smart and clever and invest in the proper things.

Our municipalities across this country have taken the effort to understand how those investments are made and are likely to be the best ones to lead us forward in the future in making investments.

It is incredibly important for the federal government to recognize the partnership that should be in place with the municipalities when it comes to investment in infrastructure.

I want to quote the former mayor of the City of Yellowknife, Gord Van Tighem, who spent many years in the position. He said, "In towns that have good water, affordable housing, power, and jobs, people can live healthy lifestyles." Healthy lifestyles should be the goal for all Canadians.

The government could take real action on meeting Canada's infrastructure deficit if it would only take a strategic approach instead of funding projects politically to gain the most political advantage.

We really have to move away from that. We have to move to a system that allows municipalities to make logical, rational choices about the future according to the best possible practices that have been identified for accomplishing our goals.

Sustainability is so important. We cannot leave our grandchildren with this infrastructure deficit. We cannot accept that our grandchildren will still be trying to go to work in situations that are not cleverly thought out by this generation. This generation has a responsibility to leave something better than we have to date. That should be our goal.

I hope the Conservatives will support this resolution and that we can work unanimously to build a better Canada.