

Region fast-tracks infrastructure spending.

By MATTHEW VAN DONGEN, SUN MEDIA - June 20, 2009

Niagara region is in a race to start and finish \$88 million in construction projects within 18 months or risk losing government stimulus cash.

The province and the federal government recently committed a combined \$58.8 million to six "shovel-ready" infrastructure projects in the region, including major roadwork and sewage treatment upgrades in Grimsby, Lincoln, Niagara Falls, Port Colborne and Fort Erie.

The catch: Project costs remaining after March 2011 aren't eligible for stimulus cash, said regional finance commissioner John Bergmsa.

"That implies funding may actually be withdrawn if projects don't proceed within the planned time frame," Bergmsa told regional councillors Thursday.

Meeting the ambitious deadline will "strain" regional staff and contractors, Bergmsa said. "It's not a slam dunk to get these done."

The region is also racing other municipalities for good deals, said public works commissioner Ken Brothers.

The recession has recently provided "quite favourable" prices for construction projects, said Brothers, but he added the flood of economic stimulus cash will soon create plenty of work for contractors.

"Right now, we're in a position to accelerate our projects in advance of everyone else," he said.

"We're all after the best possible prices ... so far, so good."

Councillors approved a series of motions Thursday night designed to speed up the tendering process for upcoming projects, including: Amending the purchasing bylaw to give public works staff more authority to make contract decisions quickly and delegating authority to chief administrative officer Mike Trojan to award approved contracts to bidders during late July and August when no regional council meetings are scheduled.

Council also agreed to approve and pay for each stimulus project at the same time. Normally, council releases the money for projects about three weeks after voting approval.

A list of regional infrastructure projects to receive federal and provincial stimulus cash:

- * High-rate treatment plant for sewage overflows in Niagara Falls - \$15 million.
- * Rebuilding Mountain Road in Niagara Falls - \$3.5 million.
- * Expansion of Baker Road sewage treatment plant in Grimsby - \$25 million.
- * Expansion of Seaway sewage treatment plant in Port Colborne - \$22 million.
- * Frenchman's Creek sewage servicing in Fort Erie - \$20 million.
- * Rebuilding Fly Road in Lincoln - \$2.7 million.

Total - \$88.2 million.