

# **POLITICS: City should take advantage of federal infrastructure money, councillor says**

## ***Throne speech sets stage for Tuesday's budget***

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The economy is top priority - indeed, the only priority - for Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government in 2009, according to the abbreviated throne speech delivered by Governor General Michaëlle Jean Monday afternoon.

"Today we meet at a time of unprecedented economic uncertainty," said Jean in a seven-and-a-half minute speech from the throne in the Senate Chambers in Ottawa.

"The global credit crunch has dragged the world economy into a crisis whose pull we cannot escape. The nations of the world are grappling with challenges that Canada can address but not avoid... The government's agenda and the priorities of Parliament must adapt in response to the deepening crisis."

The speech came on the heels of a raft of unprecedented pre-budget announcements from the Conservative government over the weekend, and a day before Finance Minister Jim Flaherty unveils his budget before the House of Commons.

Depending on how a coalition between the Liberals, New Democratic Party and Bloc Québécois holds up, and how well the budget addresses the country's economic crisis, there could quickly follow a non-confidence vote. Such a vote would defeat the government and either trigger an election or a coalition government formed by opposition parties.

But the throne speech appeared to indicate a "non-partisan" approach to the crisis.

"There is no monopoly on good ideas because we face the crisis together," read Jean. "There can be no pride of authorship - only the satisfaction of identifying solutions that will work for all Canadians."

Given the pre-budget announcements over the past few days, many of the ideas in the budget will be on full display tomorrow. The budget will project a \$64 billion deficit over the next two years - \$34 billion for the first year and \$30 billion the second.

On Monday morning, Transportation Minister John Baird announced the government will spend \$7 billion on infrastructure - \$4 billion of which will go to municipal-provincial projects that can start quickly. Another \$2 billion will go to colleges and universities and \$1 billion will go into funding for green projects.

Among other expenditures: laid-off workers will see \$1.5 billion in funding to boost training; \$500 million will go to support for older workers; and \$1 billion will be going in to funding social housing renovations.

A spokesperson for Mayor David Miller's office said Miller will be holding off on commenting on both the package and the throne speech until after Flaherty delivers the full budget Tuesday.

But some councillors are already expressing enthusiasm.

Ward 22 (St. Paul's) Councillor Michael Walker will be bringing a motion to Toronto Council's meeting tomorrow, urging council to endorse the federal budget as it pertains to social housing.

"The federal government is specifically earmarking social housing for a billion dollars and we should be taking advantage of that," said Walker. "It's estimated we'll get \$120 million out of that billion dollars for social housing renovation restoration. We're talking in the same breath of disposing of 350 housing units because they're in such bad shape. Well how can we ethically be supporting some initiative like that when we have so many people crying out for affordable housing? We should be supporting maybe not the whole budget but this budget initiative."