

# Done right, infrastructure boosts our economy and society

By Susan McIsaac

December 3, 2015 – *The Globe and Mail*

Friday's Speech from the Throne will unveil the road map for Canada's new government. Perhaps nothing differentiated the main parties during the election more than the Liberals' commitment to stimulate our economy by investing in infrastructure. By expanding the scope of what gets built, and adopting an innovative approach to how projects are delivered, there is an opportunity to improve both social and economic bottom lines.

Transit, schools, hospitals – all are targeted for an injection of support. And the government has indicated a willingness to go beyond traditional infrastructure with a targeted commitment to social infrastructure. That's going to bring a much-needed focus on affordable housing, child-care spaces and recreational facilities. The government shouldn't stop there. We have an opportunity to go one step further, by expanding our definition of social infrastructure to include strong community infrastructure.

When people are hungry, homeless, or out of work, they turn to local programs and services for help. These supports are how everyday Canadians access the jobs and opportunities they need to contribute to our collective prosperity. But in too many communities there isn't enough space to deliver these programs – or what exists is inadequate.

Villages, towns, and cities across the country have grown, but too often community space hasn't kept pace with changing times. As a result, service-delivery organizations are struggling to meet demand in physical spaces that are sorely lacking. There are excellent examples of new community hubs – central locations where people access multiple services under one roof – in a handful of communities across the country. We need a nationwide commitment to build more, and to improve existing spaces. Expanding our definition of social infrastructure to include where people

access services is a key step in the path to prosperity.

And when it comes to infrastructure, we need to think about more than what we build – how we build is just as important. There is growing momentum for a new approach to capital projects – one that also builds a strong labour force and drives economic growth. Community Benefits Agreements guarantee local hiring, good wages, job training and community supports. They target those who are often left out of economic opportunity: youth, newcomers and people living in poverty. And they create a supply of skilled workers in fields that are projected to experience growth.

This groundbreaking approach is being applied to a new rapid transit line in Toronto, and is showing such promise the provincial government recently committed to extend the framework to all new capital projects across Ontario. The federal government should expand this innovative approach Canada-wide.

Now is the time for bold ideas, and for pioneering new solutions to old problems. If we expand our definition of social infrastructure, we can connect more people than ever before to the opportunities they need to succeed. If we take a new approach to capital projects, we can ensure local economies directly contribute to our national prosperity.

Canadians voted for change. In this Speech from the Throne, let's see a concrete commitment to changing lives and transforming communities. Let's harness proven strategies for stimulating local economies. And let's position Canada as a world leader in infrastructure development that improves both our social and economic bottom lines.

*Susan McIsaac is CEO of United Way Toronto and York Region*