

## Ford government initiatives top list of 2019 Ontario construction newsmakers

Angela Gismondi December 30, 2019



Premier Doug Ford's government was the 2019 Ontario newsmaker in construction through a variety of initiatives it enacted in its first year in office, say stakeholders.

The Ontario General Contractors Association points to a new program it worked on with the Ministry of Labour and the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, called Supporting Ontario's Safe Employers, as a key newsmaker from its point of view. The program formally recognizes employers who successfully implement health and safety programs in their workplaces with financial rewards coming in the form of rebates.

"It was the collaborative approach that has led to a really positive outcome," said Clive Thurston, OGCA president.

Also topping the list for the OGCA was the implementation of the second part of Ontario's Construction Act, adjudication and prompt payment, and the release of a second guide book for practitioners on how to deal with the new act.

"What we want to do is give people the tools they need to deal with the act and change their business models to deal with the changes and not run afoul of it," said Thurston.

Ian Cunningham, president of the Council of Ontario Construction Associations, said another big story in 2019 was the changes to the government itself after a rough first year in office.

“Premier Ford hit the reset button in June and totally overhauled his government and its approach to conducting business,” said Cunningham “He fired his autocratic chief of staff and replaced him with a qualified person. The language and tone of all government communications softened. Many of the government cuts were rolled back.”

Around the same time, Monte McNaughton became Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development and “went on a personal crusade to meet with virtually every construction stakeholder group out there to learn about their challenges and issues,” added Cunningham.

“Furthermore, he pushed the Accreditation Standard, which was more than 10 years in the making, over the finish line,” he added. “When the training and skills development responsibilities were added to his portfolio, he put an immediate stop to the two-year review of portable skill sets and restricted trades that the previous minister had announced but which had not commenced.”

Karen Renkema of the Progressive Contractors Association of Canada (PCA) said the provincial government’s passing of Bill 66, Restoring Ontario’s Competitiveness Act, in the spring was a major 2019 event for construction. The act closes a legislative loophole that deemed some of Ontario’s largest municipalities as “construction employers.”

“There tends to be a broad consensus among the provincial and municipal governments on fairness, equity and competition and embracing and understanding those concepts as it comes to building public infrastructure...that’s a pretty important win for us,” said Renkema.

Another big story for PCA was the modernization of the apprenticeship system and the winding down of the Ontario College of Trades.

“I think finally there is a really appetite to do some really big changes, to rethink how we train our apprentices, how we attract people to the trades,” Renkema commented.

For the **Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO)**, the Sidewalk Labs proposal in Toronto is something they kept an eye on all year.

“The fact that we’re coming up with smart city innovative proposals and there seems to be some traction for that in the City of Toronto, is important,” said Andy Manahan, RCCAO executive director.

Another announcement that topped RCCAO’s list was Toronto’s subway system not being uploaded to the province. In October, the city and the province came to an agreement that includes the city retaining ownership of the subway network.

“For the province to take on that kind of a financial obligation, when they’re trying to bring down the deficit, was clearly (an initiative) going in a different direction,” Manahan noted.

Giovanni Cautillo of the Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association said the big story is the announcement of the excess soils regulatory package made recently by the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks.

“Ultimately it does do a lot of good for the industry when it comes to excess soils,” said Cautillo. “It no longer looks at soil as a waste product which is a big deal.”

The WSIB changing their structure when it comes to how contractors will be rated is also big news for the association.

“We are still on the fence on that one simply because you got the unfunded liability down to zero and it was done so with the current rate structure, so why did you have to change it now and what are the repercussions,” asked Cautillo. “We probably won’t really know until two or three years from now.”

Patrick Dillon, business manager of the Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council of Ontario said this year weighed in on Bill 66 as a major 2019 newsmaker for unionized labour.

“The bill is nothing short of a full-scale attack on free, collective bargaining rights targeting construction workers in the province of Ontario,” said Dillon. “We find that a real challenge to our charter rights. The Building Trades Council is contemplating a constitutional challenge to the legislation.”

**Richard Lyall, president of the Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON),** said one of the biggest events in 2019, for the residential construction industry, was the collective agreements which were renegotiated in the spring.

“It was a furtherance of our industry’s ability to generally maintain stability in that environment and that’s a credit to both labour and management,” said Lyall.

Bill 108, More Housing, More Choice Act was also a big win for RESCON in 2019.

“It was the most comprehensive changes to housing policy in a generation,” said Lyall.