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# Show us the money, Mr. Flaherty

By MARILLA STEPHENSON

THE SHOVELS for the "shovel-ready" projects are ready.

Where is all that money the Harper Conservatives promised to start rebuilding the Canadian economy?

Federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty spent much of the weekend scolding other western countries, in particular the United States, for slow action on delivering stimulus packages and implementing reforms in their banking systems.

He should take a look around his own backyard.

Flaherty attended meetings in Washington along with finance ministers and central bankers from the G20 nations. In an interview with The Canadian Press, our finance minister pushed western countries to act faster on stimulus spending and banking reforms.

"For economic reasons and for confidence-building reasons, we need all of these countries, including Canada, to fulfill their commitments and we need it to happen rapidly," he said.

He added a jab at the U.S. for pledging to following through next week on a commitment to report publicly on progress made at shoring up many of its major banking institutions.

"I appreciate that action after, let's face it, a rather long time."

Flaherty may have the power only to urge his neighbours to act quickly. But what's stopping him from speeding up the response in Canada? He is the finance minister, after all.

It's been quite awhile since he stood in the House of Commons to unveil his own reforms and stimulus package. While Canada may be meeting its obligations in terms of the International Monetary Fund, it is less clear that the Harper Conservatives have delivered on promises to move swiftly to stimulate the Canadian economy.

Just last weekend, the Atlantic Mayors Congress wrapped up meetings in Halifax. At the conclusion, the mayors called on Ottawa to get moving on funding "shovel-ready" projects.

"We are facing harsh economic conditions, and while the government must be applauded for its budget focus on infrastructure and job creation, we are concerned that delays in announcing details on how municipalities can access the fund might mean that we will lose this

construction season," Halifax Mayor Peter Kelly, the chairman of the congress, said on behalf of the group.

One day later, Diane Finley, minister responsible for the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corp., announced a \$2-billion fund for low-cost loans to municipalities. The money will help municipalities cover their share of funding for infrastructure projects. Typically, these projects comprise equal one-third funding shares from the federal, provincial and municipal governments.

The difficulty for smaller municipalities in regions with less boisterous economies is coming up with their share to participate in these federal programs. The result, too often, is that municipalities most in need of an economic boost are in the worst position to access help.

The CMHC program will provide aid for housing-related projects, including water and sewer infrastructure, transportation and waste management projects that serve residential areas.

It appears, by definition, that this particular program would likely exclude three major projects among the list of priorities in the Halifax region: a new convention centre, a new central library and demolishing the Cogswell interchange.

Kelly, however, indicated that there are also plenty of road and water and sewer projects on the region's wish list. Perhaps these can benefit from the program.

It is already nearly May. The economic problems have only deepened. The longer Ottawa drags out this process, the longer a recovery will be delayed. By the time municipalities get approval from Ottawa and the province for their projects and then qualify for funding with CMHC, several more months will likely pass.

The appropriate messages are being sent from on high: move fast, inject capital, shore up communities across this nation.

Down at ground level, the story is quite different. More jobs are being lost, access to capital is squeezed, provincial tax revenues are shrinking and people are having trouble getting employment insurance benefits in a timely manner.

The intentions in Ottawa may be good, but oh my, the wheels do grind slowly.

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