

Province's engineer hiring stalls Only 60 in-house staff added Nine of every 10 roadway-structure inspections done by private firms

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Transport Quebec has fallen dramatically short of a key internal need that a union head said Monday it had acknowledged in 2007: to beef up its in-house staff by about 40 per cent with the projected hiring of about 200 additional road engineers.

The plan had been to obtain a better internal handle on developing roadwaystructure woes, Michel Gagnon, president of the Association professionnelle des ingénieurs du gouvernement du Québec, added.

But with only 60 net hires of mostly young, inexperienced engineers since then, in the face of continuing attrition, Transport Quebec is perhaps one-quarter of the way to the objective it expressed almost four years ago, Gagnon said.

As a result, he added, Transport Quebec relies on engineers from private firms to perform about nine of every 10 roadway-structure inspections across the provincial highway system - a proportion Transport Quebec later confirmed.

About three-quarters of that type of inspection work should be done in-house, Gagnon said, rather than farmed out to the private sector.

In-house staff, he argued, is best placed to develop and maintain a hands-on grasp on developing problems and priorities across the province's aged, deteriorating roadway structures.

Largely built during the 1960s and '70s, Gagnon said, these are being eaten away by road salt and hammered by more punishing traffic loads than the ones for which they were originally designed:

"We are the owners of the road network," he argued.

"We need a better understanding, an owner's understanding, of all the things that are happening to it."

About 90 per cent of Transport Quebec's roadstructure inspections are being carried out by subcontractors, Gagnon said.

"It should be maybe 25 per cent," Gagnon said - with the rest, three of every four inspections, performed inhouse "to ensure continuity."

Asked about Gagnon's contention, Real Grégoire, a Transport Quebec spokesperson, responded: "I can't comment on what he said - it's not my role."

Grégoire did say that Transport Quebec has 239 in-house engineers who are trained as structural inspectors, and uses an additional 736 engineers from the private sector who have the same training.

Farming out the inspection work means accumulated expertise and experience is easily lost when one engineering subcontractor is replaced with another, Gagnon said, as these inspection contracts expire.

Responded Grégoire: "We can't have all those people on our payroll."

Beyond that, however, he added: "I'm not in a position to comment."

Meanwhile, engineering hires at Transport Quebec since late 2007, Gagnon said, are largely "young, without much experience" - while more seasoned specialists continue to leave in mid-career because the private sector and Hydro-Québec pay considerably more for engineers with 15 or so years of experience.

Gagnon pegged the pay gap at 25 to 30 per cent.

Typically, a Transport Quebec engineer gets \$78,000 a year plus benefits and pension, he said, versus \$100,000 a year for his or her counterpart at Hydro-Québec.

Meanwhile, at engineering-consulting firms - which can be Transport Quebec subcontractors - "I've heard sometimes of \$110,000 or \$115,000" annually.

The ministry has begun paying an eight-per-cent annual retention bonus for Transport Quebec engineers in the Montreal region, Gagnon said, "but it's not enough to keep (the more experienced) people from leaving."

Almost four years since the government took delivery of the Johnson Commission report into the 2006 collapse in Laval of the de la Concorde overpass, Gagnon said, Transport Quebec has largely implemented its 17 recommendations.

Julie Boulet, who was Quebec Transport Minister in fall 2007 when the Johnson report was made public, had then set the goal of boosting in-house staffing by 200, Gagnon said:

Grégoire said he could not comment on what Boulet said at the time.

In line with Johnson's recommendations, Quebec's annual spending on maintenance of road structures has mushroomed, Grégoire noted, to \$1.2 billion in 2011 from \$440 million in 2007.

Concurrently, Gagnon said, the number of unionized engineers at Transport Quebec has increased by 60, or 11.8 per cent, to 570 today from 510 in 2007.