

Province has penchant for private firms Costly habit Questions about cost-effectiveness

MAX HARROLD

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The Quebec government's costly habit of hiring private-sector engineers has cut deeply into Transport Quebec's expertise of our aging public roads and highways, the government engineers' union says.

And Transport Quebec has never demonstrated the merits of its preference for the private sector because it has not done a cost-effectiveness study on it, added Michel Gagnon, president of the Association professionnelle des ingénieurs du gouvernement du Québec, representing 1,150 public service engineers.

Ever since Jean Charest became premier in 2003, the Quebec government has implemented his vision of reducing the size of government, Gagnon said. "There has been this dogma about cutting government," Gagnon said. "But we never heard them say they also wanted to pay less."

A perfect example of the shift toward the private sector was the repair job being done the morning of Sunday, July 31, when tonnes of concrete from the ceiling of the Ville Marie tunnel fell onto the roadway, narrowly missing motorists. A technician was in charge at the site, under orders from engineers with a consortium of private firms hired by the government.

In fact, the government's spending on private engineering firms has grown along with the ballooning public budget for road work, while the hiring of Transport Quebec engineers has grown very little. Spending on roadwork in 2003-04 was \$930 million, \$91 million of which went to private firms, data obtained by the engineers union under an access-to-information request shows. Skip ahead six years and governments are spending stimulus money on public infrastructure projects to stave off the global economic downturn, and to upgrade a road network that is showing serious signs of wear and tear. The data shows the government spent \$3.7 billion on roads in 2009-10, of which \$364 million went to private firms.

In those six years, Transport Quebec hired 20 more full-time engineers.

"It's like you have a dad doing weekly groceries for \$150 but then later, when he has five children, he's only spending \$170 a week," Gagnon said.

On Thursday, Maxime Sauvageau, a spokesperson for Transport Minister Sam Hamad, reiterated Hamad's statements made since the July 31 collapse that the minister is planning a thorough policy review that may lead to more in-house engineers being hired by Transport Quebec.

"Hamad, who is himself an engineer, said his first goal is to reinforce the in-house expertise and if this means hiring more engineers, that will be done," Sauvageau told The Gazette. He could not say when the policy review will be completed or how many additional engineers might be hired.

Gagnon believes that private firms may make more sense for one-time megaprojects like the Turcot Interchange upgrade or the Highway 25 and 30 projects, but inspecting roads and work sites is something that should be done in-house because of the vast publicly owned network involved.

"There are 10,000 bridges to inspect every year," Gagnon explained. "We need to visually inspect each one each year and do a full general inspection every three years. When we outsource those jobs it is hard to retain knowledge of the network. We don't know our own roads anymore."

It's not just a problem for the rank-and-file, he added. Several high-ranking deputy ministers from Transport Quebec have left for the private sector recently, Gagnon said. Transport Quebec relies on private engineering firms for about 90 to 95 per cent of its required engineering duties, Gagnon added.

Data on bridge inspections from the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board shows Quebec is in the minority in North America with such a heavy reliance on the private sector for engineers, Gagnon said.

(La Presse reported last week that Ontario and British Columbia outsource roughly half of their engineering duties to the private sector.)

The U.S. data shows that only Florida and Ohio come close to Quebec, with both those states using private consultants 95 per cent of the time for bridge inspections and in-house engineers five per cent of the time.