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Momentum builds for infrastructure improvements - by Ken Fisher

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With the 2018 elections behind us, what can we look forward to for infrastructure funding?

While little progress has been made since candidate Donald Trump promised a half trillion dollar infrastructure program, or since he revealed a \$200 billion federal spending plan which could theoretically leverage both state and private investment earlier this year, chances have improved that a meaningful appropriation could be adopted in the new Congress.

Presumptive house speaker Nancy Pelosi revealed that infrastructure was a topic she and the president had discussed when he made a congratulatory call after the Democrats had taken the house. "Last night I had a conversation with President Trump about how we could work together, one of the issues that came up was ... building infrastructure for America, and I hope that we can achieve that," Pelosi told reporters. "He talked about it during his campaign and really didn't come through with it in his first two years in office. But that issue has not been a partisan issue in the Congress of the United States."

Similarly, returning senate majority leader Mitch McConnell disclosed that he and Pelosi had had a similar conversation, "The one issue that leader Pelosi and I discussed this morning, where there could be a possible bipartisan agreement, is something on infrastructure." Trump also acknowledged that this could be an area where they could reach agreement, "We have a lot of things in common on infrastructure," the president said.

However, it is too early to tell whether anything concrete will pour out of the Capital. Potential roadblocks include a rising federal deficit and Trump's complicated relationships with key Democrats such as Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, whose priority Gateway Tunnel project under the Hudson remains in funding limbo.

Closer to home, governor Andrew Cuomo's successful reelection bid was based in part on his infrastructure record, including the completion of the new Tappan Zee Bridge (now named after his father), the new Kosciusko Bridge, progress on reconstruction of LaGuardia Airport and opening of the first segment of the Second Ave. Subway. The latter diminished in prominence after the NYC subway system experienced a "summer from hell" but Cuomo pivoted from denying responsibility for the MTA to touting the emergency plan promoted by former chair Joe Lhota and Transit Authority president Andy Byford. These visible accomplishments have quieted the perception that large projects cannot be managed.

Cuomo may find a willing partner in senator Andrea Stewart-Cousins, who will lead the new Democratic majority in the state senate. However, her focus may not be on signature major projects and rather on less visible but important areas such as water quality, schools and housing. She needs to balance New York City's vast requirements with delivering funding for her newly elected upstate and suburban Democratic members.

Mayor Bill de Blasio has dramatically increased the amount of infrastructure spending during his term, with early focus on affordable housing and post-Sandy storm protection. Tarrred by the mismanagement and decay at the New York City Housing Authority, de Blasio is embarking on an

effort to address years of neglect using design-build procurement for which the city was granted authority by the legislature, together with closure of the Rikers Island jail complex and rehabilitation of the BQE Cantilever in Brooklyn. It is unclear how much effort he will continue to put behind the BQX trolley or Sunnyside Yards concepts.

Politics, however, is not Newtonian. Government bodies in motion do not necessarily remain in motion and reactions are never equal and opposite. Only continued advocacy will keep the need for critical infrastructure in the forefront. That takes the form of asking elected officials about their priorities whenever the opportunity arises and by amplifying the industry's voices through support of organizations like the American Council of Engineering Companies of New York, for which a robust capital commitment at all levels of government is a key focus.

Fisher represents ACEC New York Metro Region, but the views expressed are his own.

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