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Infrastructure projects on hold until government approval

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Halifax Regional Municipality's new four-pad arena is just one highlight from the draft budget tabled Tuesday night, but city officials admitted they have to wait on provincial and federal governments before that and other infrastructure projects can take off.

Director of finance Cathie O'Toole said HRM won't know for sure that all cash needed for the \$40-million facility and land off Hammonds Plains Road will come until province's budget is passed by a new Nova Scotia government and the federal government gives its nod of approval.

The municipality is contributing a third of the cost for the rink but expects the other two levels of government to pick up the remaining tab through Ottawa's economic stimulus package. The city hopes to open the arena by September 2010.

"In the meantime, our piece of funding is in place so that work is continuing," she said outside of council chambers.

"If it looks at any point that the delay, from the province or the feds, will impact the timing of our project, we'd go back to council and give them some options."

The other two affected projects are the \$55-million Central Library and the new \$12-million Woodside ferry, O'Toole said. Both are waiting for money from the Build Canada Fund.

The municipal operating budget would increase by 3.6 per cent at a total of \$578 million for 2009-10, plus a gross capital amount of \$151 million if councillors are in favour.

O'Toole called it "a status quo" budget that maintains tax rates and municipal services.

"It's continuing on with the five-year capital plan . . . but it's trying to position us a little bit better to take advantage of the infrastructure funding."

Mayor Peter Kelly told reporters this year's budget isn't "overly ambitious," but still addresses the city's needs for improved policing, fire services, roads and recreation. City councillors start debating the budget May 26, with a final vote possible June 2.

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