The governor general was there with Lady Bessborough. So were Winnipeg’s mayor, Colonel Ralph Webb, and Manitoba’s minister of Public Works, William R. Clubb. And gathered beneath the leafy elms lining St. Mary’s Avenue stood hundreds of Winnipeggers in the late afternoon sun. It was mid-August 1932, and all were present to watch the laying of the cornerstone at Winnipeg’s new Civic Auditorium. With the last few notes of “God Save the King” still ringing from the Canadian Legion Band’s horns, Lord Bessborough accepted a trowel from the chief contractor and carefully lined the stone’s edges with mortar. Into a gap behind the place where the cornerstone would rest, William Clubb tucked a container that held some coins, a few papers of record, and several copies of recent newspapers. Workmen who had been standing nearby then neatly slid the stone into place.¹
The presence of the king’s representative, the Earl of Bessborough, governor general of Canada from 1931 to 1935, lent an air of royal spectacle to what was already a symbolic occasion. The cornerstone ceremony that August afternoon put the finishing touch on one of the last—and most impressive—in a series of public works projects designed to provide work relief to the city’s jobless residents. Built entirely by workers taken from Winnipeg’s unemployment rolls, the Civic Auditorium represented thousands of man hours of work to hundreds of the city’s married jobless men, many of whom had been without steady income for years.

The auditorium was only one of many unemployment relief projects carried on in Canadian cities between 1930 and 1932. Financed by all three levels of government but administered entirely at the local level, the projects were designed to provide maximum employment to the growing ranks of the nation’s urban unemployed. The projects offered significant additional benefits to the cities. For one thing, they provided cities with lasting and useful infrastructure at a fraction of what they would have cost without federal and provincial financial involvement. For another, the projects typically engaged large local manufacturing and construction contracting businesses, helping them to survive the economically difficult period.

Cities embarked on the first batch of projects in the late autumn of 1930 under a widespread belief that the economic downturn would not last and that work relief would only be needed to carry the cities and the unemployed through the coming difficult winter. By the following autumn, however, the Depression and its effects had only grown worse, so cities began another series of relief projects, again with the hope that the spring would bring some respite. When it did not, municipal governments clamoured once more for federal and provincial financing for further work relief projects, but this time the senior governments were unwilling or unable to help. No new jointly funded major work relief projects would be forthcoming in the autumn of 1932; the era of national urban work-for-wages schemes was over. Thereafter, and for the remainder of the Depression, cities could only offer their urban unemployed relatively modest jobs such as street sweeping or snow shovelling.
Dissatisfied, city authorities continued to impress upon both the federal and provincial governments the need for major jointly funded work relief projects, but the upper echelons of government remained resolutely opposed to reanimating the programs that had marked the first three years of the Depression.  

City engineers and other technical experts played a central role in shepherding city work relief projects from conception to completion. These men were not social work leaders intent on providing the urban unemployed with aid and lifting them from their “demoralized” state. They were professional city planners who organized their approach to work relief during the early Depression years much like they had approached city building and maintenance work in normal times. To
these professionals, work relief meant jobs for the unemployed, not charity for the urban poor. Their work was imbued with rationalist and scientific principles of a Taylorist bent, not with the ideals of professional welfare workers, who emphasized case work and focused on the moral regulation of the welfare client.

Historian Bonnie Fox Schwartz notes this effect in her examination of the short-lived Civil Works Administration (CWA) in the United States. “Businessmen and efficiency experts,” she argues, “came to dominate the CWA from Washington down to the state and county offices; and they ran the program more like an emergency employment corporation rather than charitable made work.”5 The work relief programs carried out in Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg were similarly dominated by city engineers and planners: they proposed the projects, organized the labour and materials required to implement them, and managed the workers and work distribution through to each project’s completion. And much like the CWA’s efficiency experts, they shared the spirit of the management innovations of the 1920s. According to Schwartz, the CWA’s efficiency experts stood in direct conflict with professional social workers, resulting in a contest over control of the CWA. In the end, social workers failed to support continued federal funding of the CWA after the winter of 1934; social workers, Schwartz argues, “saw the CWA as a disruption of proper case-work counselling, and they resented the engineers for usurping their hard-won role as chief dispensers of federal aid to the unemployed.”6 With the efficiency experts out of the way after 1934, the social workers could resume control over unemployment relief. There is little evidence of such a contest in Prairie cities during the same period, but, according to historian James Struthers, Canada’s most famous social worker, Charlotte Whitton, saw in the federal government’s abandonment of work relief as an unemployment relief measure a “golden opportunity for the professionalizing of the dole.”7

In large measure, the direction of public works relief projects was governed by the local peculiarities in the orientations of city planners, city engineers, and citizens. Edmonton, for example, directed its work relief efforts mainly at sewerage and gravelling projects—the nuts and bolts of city infrastructure—while Saskatoon and Winnipeg both
pursued grander projects such as the Broadway Bridge and the Civic Auditorium, respectively. A concert hall, several bridges, various buildings, riverbank improvements, grading and gravelling and brush work projects, and major sewerage construction: all reflected city officials’ ideas about what their cities needed. During these difficult years, infrastructure needs were, of course, always measured against the amount of work (the number of man hours, for example) that the project might offer the unemployed. ⁸

Public works projects in Prairie cities—as well as relief administration generally—were carried out within the wider context of the expansion in both size and influence of the cities themselves. The sheer growth, nothing short of astronomical, of Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg through the three decades leading to the Depression (see table 2) had transformed those places from mere contenders to three of the most important political, economic, and cultural centres in Canada.

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<th>1901</th>
<th>1911</th>
<th>1921</th>
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<tr>
<td>Edmonton</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>59,000</td>
<td>79,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saskatoon</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>26,000</td>
<td>43,000</td>
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</table>
| Winnipeg   | 48,000| 157,000| 229,000| 295,000  

* This figure includes “greater Winnipeg.” The actual city population in 1931 was 179,000. Source: Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931* (Ottawa: J. O. Patenaude, King’s Printer, 1935).

CITIES AND CITY BUILDING IN THE EARLY 1900s

Authorities in the emerging five metropolises on the Canadian Prairies—Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon, Calgary, and Edmonton—sensed keenly the promised wealth from the agricultural and settlement boom of the first decade of the twentieth century. Boosters believed that in order
to capture the largest possible share of that wealth, city administrations had to develop their cities’ industrial bases and urban infrastructure before their rivals, the smaller but equally ambitious surrounding cities, towns, and settlements. The early 1900s were therefore marked by building and city service construction on a scale never before seen on the Canadian Prairies. Newly formed cities like Edmonton, Saskatoon, Regina, and Calgary embarked on mad infrastructure construction in an effort to keep pace with the booming real estate and agriculture-related markets then buffeting their borders—in Saskatoon alone, 267 independent real estate offices struggled to manage all the buying and selling and speculation. By 1912, Saskatoon had constructed forty-one miles of concrete sidewalk, one of the hallmarks distinguishing a growing and important metropolitan centre; the concrete walks replaced the earlier boardwalk street perimeters and guarded city folk’s boots and shoes from the muck of the streets. A combined total of nearly eighty miles of sewers and water mains carried Saskatonians’ waste out of the city proper and provided homes and businesses with fresh running water.

Eleven miles of street railway tracks transported citizens in and out of the downtown core. New banking buildings; agricultural implement company buildings; hotels and retail stores; schools, including the new provincial university; churches; and other civic buildings sprang up rapidly after the arrival of three branch rail lines in 1908.

In Edmonton, the process of city building was well under way by 1905. In December of that year, the city engineering department reported to the city commissioners that it had produced eleven miles of sidewalks, graded most city streets, and set up fifty-three street lights. Two years later, the city boasted a new street railway along Jasper Avenue, a waterworks department capable of pumping 5.5 million gallons of water each day, thirty-two miles of water mains, and twenty-five miles of sewers. The boom in the years prior to World War I saw even more development, as the population grew from 18,500 in 1908 to 63,000 in 1913, following the incorporation of Strathcona into the city.

At the same time, Winnipeg was emerging as an important industrial and commercial centre. Manitoba’s industrial output (of which
Winnipeg produced the bulk) stood at $13 million in 1900. Ten years later, it had grown to $54 million. Behind the growing industrial output, of course, was a growing industrial workforce that demanded more city services like roads and sidewalks, streetcars, housing developments, and electricity, sanitation, and sewer systems. A well-pleased Winnipeg Board of Trade reported in 1905 that “a greater amount of public works was carried out in 1904 than in any preceding year.” In that year, the city had built seventeen miles of asphalt, thirty-three miles of macadam, sixteen miles of block pavement, twenty-three miles of artificial stone, and 186 miles of plank walks. The sanitation department had also been busy, constructing eighty-seven miles of sewers and ninety-nine miles of water mains. By 1906, Winnipeg’s city council had convinced itself and the city’s ratepayers to form the publicly owned and operated Winnipeg City Hydro to generate enough electricity to service the city’s growing domestic and industrial needs. Construction of a power-generating station at Pointe du Bois, some 150 kilometres northeast of the city, began three years later, and Winnipeg received its first power from the site in 1911. In the postwar years, city building slowed considerably from the rapid pace of the century’s first two decades, partly because of slower population growth through the 1920s. In part, too, the slowdown was due to the uncertain economic times of the early to mid-1920s, when the recession that had begun in 1913 reasserted itself following the Great War. But the intensive city building through the early boom years meant that the three Prairie cities had laid the basic infrastructure groundwork by the end of the Great War, and thereafter, this groundwork required primarily maintenance work rather than outright replacement.

By the 1920s, few people (not least the municipal officials themselves) doubted which cities flexed the greatest political, economic, and cultural muscle on the Canadian Prairies. Nor would any deny the future import to both the region and the nation of cities like Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg. In fact, the fortunes of those cities were part of a much larger, continent-wide trend that would see the growing prominence of the urban, often at the expense of the rural. In the United States, extensive railroad networks, and the access those networks provided to Midwestern raw resources (especially coal and iron ore), transformed
cities like Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee, and Chicago into titans of steel and iron fabrication through the late nineteenth century. Thereafter, based on that early industrial growth, Midwestern cities emerged through the first three decades of the twentieth century as the primary sites for the production of one of the most important commodities of the twentieth century: the automobile.21 Although William Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* offers a much bleaker view of the rise of the industrial city through the same period, Cronon nevertheless shows how western cities (like his Chicago) emerged out of the Great War as economic, political, and, increasingly, cultural power centres. This shift would come later to the Canadian Prairies than elsewhere since agriculture dominated Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba until at least the end of the Second World War. However, all the early signs of growing metropolitan power were already in evidence at the onset of the Depression: skyrocketing population growth, intensive infrastructure building, and increasingly complex bureaucratic forms. In Winnipeg, for instance, important rail lines like the Canadian Pacific Railway, the Northern Pacific, the Canadian Northern, and the Grand Trunk–National Transcontinental linked that city with critical regional, national, and continental markets, thus securing access to much larger markets for Winnipeg business interests.22

**URBAN WORK RELIEF AT THE BEGINNING OF THE DEPRESSION**

Municipally initiated work relief schemes were not uncommon features of the urban landscape even before the onset of the Depression. Local improvement projects, typically small scale and seasonally based, offered underemployed labourers limited opportunities to earn some money between the end of the harvest season and the beginning of the spring construction season.23 The conventional wisdom during recessions or periods of seasonal market instability was that work relief was preferable to direct relief. Work relief kept men busy, reinforced the work ethic, and limited the possibility of welfare dependence.
Throughout the recession of the early 1920s, for example, the federal government, while maintaining that unemployment relief was a local responsibility, nevertheless offered some financing of public works designed to create employment.24 By 1929, little had changed in this approach to unemployment relief.25 “The main question is already settled,” declared the Saskatoon Star-Phoenix on 8 November 1929. “It is agreed that work is the best solution of any unemployment problem and that public authorities should, so far as possible, spread their spending programs over the winter season.” The editor of the Manitoba Free Press concurred: “Public works, which are needed and which the public funds can afford, should . . . be undertaken.”26

By autumn 1929, when municipal governments began feeling the Depression’s first effects, they already had in place a tradition of work relief. Due to the difficult situation in which the cities found themselves that winter, the provinces agreed to bear a portion of the costs associated with winter public works construction in the western cities.27 Saskatoon officials learned of the Saskatchewan government’s plan to aid the municipality in late December. Wary of the increasingly sticky issue of responsibility for the unemployed, the provincial government took great pains to iterate Saskatoon’s basic responsibility for its own unemployment problems. The provincial minister of Railways, Labour, and Industries did admit, however, that in extraordinarily “acute” or “widespread” unemployment conditions, the federal and provincial governments had both the reason and the obligation to provide some form of unemployment relief. But by the minister’s estimation, Saskatoon’s entire jobless population—including both single and married men—numbered only 327.28 In a city of little more than forty-three thousand, this hardly qualified as either acute or widespread. Saskatoon’s own count of its jobless population, though, was at least twice this number.29 The discrepancy between the numbers probably speaks more to the shortcomings in the province’s method of counting than to any conscious exaggeration of the problem on the part of the city: the provincial officials arrived at their estimate by counting only those men who had registered at the provincial unemployment office. In any case, provincial authorities undoubtedly recognized the inaccuracy of their official count because they asked the cities
for submissions of potential public works that could provide jobs to the province’s urban unemployed over the coming winter.

Despite this encouraging tone, the Saskatchewan government, along with the provincial administrations in Alberta and Manitoba, had serious reservations about establishing, without the participation of the federal government, any real and far-reaching unemployment policy that would undoubtedly set dangerously costly precedents. Saskatchewan officials suggested that civic administrators develop alternate plans for tackling the unemployment problem because, as the deputy minister of Railways, Labour, and Industries had explained, “the furnishing of employment cannot of necessity be undertaken in every city of this province.” At the same time, provincial authorities across the Prairies reasoned that some limited provincial funding for municipal relief works, modelled after the federal emergency relief schemes of the early 1920s, not only would ease the urban unemployment problem and pacify municipal demands but would do so at a small political and economic cost to the province. After all, provincial aid in small enough doses toward what was widely understood to be a local responsibility was viewed as nothing more than an emergency palliative move, an explicitly short-term cure for an expected short-term ill.

In Saskatchewan, this meant that the province was prepared to contribute two-thirds of the extra costs associated with winter public works construction. Although local improvements were generally more efficiently carried out during the summer, efficiency was not the main goal of the provincial scheme. Winter construction, the province reasoned, would not only provide more men with more work, but it would do so when that work was needed most. The province also promised to reimburse the city for sharpening picks, one of the few tools permitted on relief jobs; maintain worksite shacks for the men; and keep gravel roads open for construction purposes on any project falling under the scheme. The program was not, however, intended to help finance any work that the city would normally carry out under less adverse economic conditions unless the men were employed “solely for the purpose of providing unemployment relief.” Nor did the province allow the city to charge materials or equipment purchases against the relief scheme,
mainly because these had a residual value outlasting the winter. And while the province was prepared to contribute financially, it would not assume any responsibility for the administration of the relief projects. The Saskatchewan government expected Saskatoon’s civic authorities not only to determine the “nature and extent” of the proposed projects but also to take full responsibility for the rotation of the men at work, ensuring that “as many men as possible should share in the work provided.”

Upon hearing of the province’s promised financial aid, Saskatoon’s engineering department immediately set about drawing up plans for storm sewers, a sewerage outlet at Eleventh Street, and a water-main extension along Eighth Avenue. According to engineering department estimates, the province would be responsible for nearly $20,000 under the scheme. The city’s chief engineer selected the three projects carefully according to certain criteria: they all demanded large amounts of hand labour, the city considered them useful and necessary, and they were expected to employ some 350 married men over the coming winter. With rotating shifts of sixty different men each week, each man would receive one week of work out of every six-week period. With a minimum wage of forty-five cents per hour, each worker would earn an average of twenty-two dollars in a week.

Although helpful, the provincial interventions hardly matched the magnitude of the unemployment crisis facing the cities. The provinces soon added their voices to the municipal chorus calling for the federal government to accept some responsibility for unemployment relief. For his part, not only did Prime Minister Mackenzie King maintain that the federal government had no responsibility for any urban unemployment problem, but he even denied that a problem existed. For all his political savvy, he vastly underestimated the depths into which some parts of the country had fallen. Over the winter and early spring of 1929–30, however, the urban unemployment rate grew ever higher, and it was not long before the crisis had assumed such proportions that the federal government could continue to ignore it only at its peril. King’s Liberals paid for his mistake in the 1930 general election.

The newly elected Conservative prime minister, Richard Bedford Bennett, true to his election promise to find work for all who were
willing “or perish in the attempt,” introduced a series of unemployment relief acts designed to provide work to all who were willing. The Unemployment Relief Act, passed in 1930 and in effect for one year, and the Unemployment and Farm Relief Act, passed in 1931 and likewise in effect for a single year, provided a legislative framework that allowed the federal government to enter into agreements with provincial governments to finance urban work relief schemes. It was under the legislative authority of these two acts that most of the urban work relief projects in the early 1930s took place. But the legislative framework, despite the hope it offered, was unwieldy, requiring municipal authorities to submit relief work proposals to their respective provincial governments for approval rather than to the federal government directly. The provinces would then resubmit those proposals to Ottawa, and federal funding for approved projects would finally flow back to the cities through the provincial governments. This complicated system reduced federal costs significantly by downloading administrative tasks to the municipalities. It also nicely upheld the fiction that unemployment relief remained a local responsibility by staying inside the bounds of constitutional divisions of powers. Still, the two unemployment relief acts offered considerable aid to the cities. In the first one, the federal government promised to bear 25 percent of the material and labour costs of approved urban work relief projects. Upon federal approval of a given project, the provinces would match the federal contribution, leaving 50 percent of the work relief cost to the municipality. The second relief act, even more attractive to cities, doubled the amount of Ottawa’s contribution to approved urban work relief programs.

**THE CASE FOR WORK RELIEF**

*Benefits for Cities*

That these “emergency” measures should have taken the form of work relief rather than direct relief, or “doles,” is in some ways surprising. After all, municipal, provincial, and federal authorities knew that from a short-term cost perspective, work relief was far more expensive than
direct relief. Whereas simple payments made to the unemployed, either in cash or in kind, cost cities only the relief itself plus a small administrative output, work relief typically involved the labour costs—again, in the form of cash wages or kind—plus the often considerable cost of materials. Depending on the sort of work relief on order, this could range anywhere from a small initial outlay for snow shovels or brooms to some 40 percent of the costs associated with more substantial projects like buildings or bridges.

Edmonton’s chief engineer made clear the difference in cost between work relief and direct relief in a letter to the city commissioner in June 1931: “Sewer construction including labor and material, seems to run about $12.00 per man day, whereas on the other extreme, direct relief . . . was 49.3¢ per man day last winter.”37 For smaller projects like grading, the difference was less extreme, but even these ventures cost cities roughly 50 percent more than straight direct relief. For every dollar spent on labour costs of grading jobs in Edmonton, for example, the city spent a further fifty cents or more, depending on the work, on associated costs such as pay for foremen, horse teams, equipment, and extra lunches for the men. In December 1931, Edmonton’s chief engineer explained that “in the case of sidehill grading, the roads have to be gravelled later on, protection fences and draining facilities have to be supplied, and recurring annual maintenance costs are involved.”38 Clearly, dollar for dollar, direct relief consistently cost cities less than work relief.

Still, useful and necessary local improvements at half the usual price, even if the municipality’s half was borrowed, was an offer no city could easily refuse. “The decision that the federal government will finance the unemployment schemes is of tremendous importance to Saskatoon and the province,” Saskatoon’s mayor, John Hair, explained in September 1931, “as it will mean that money will be obtainable for this work at a much lower rate than could be obtained by either the cities or the province. The probable saving will be approximately 20% on the cost.”39 Even after the provinces and the federal government could no longer afford to support urban work relief, cities insisted on using government contributions to direct relief toward wages on local improvement schemes whenever they could.40 After all, municipal authorities thought, the economic
downturn would probably end soon, but the improvements would continue to serve the city for years, even decades, to come.

One consistent theme running through most local discussions of possible work relief programs was an insistence that they be necessary and useful. City administrators knew that the city’s own contributions to work relief programs would be palatable to city ratepayers and non-ratepayers alike only if they met this criterion. Useful projects, moreover, enhanced a city’s stature immeasurably. The Broadway Bridge, for example, had long been considered by Saskatoon’s city council as a much needed traffic conduit connecting the popular Broadway district on the city’s south side with its downtown. The bridge would also go a long way toward relieving traffic on the decrepit Nineteenth Street Bridge. Although its construction irritated several shopkeepers along the top of Broadway near the river for several months, the city’s ratepayers overwhelmingly supported the project, both as a relief measure and as a critical addition to the city. Winnipeg’s city council was likewise “very desirous” of building the Civic Auditorium, for its cultural value as well as its promise of substantial employment for Winnipeg’s jobless.

Both Winnipeg and St. Boniface similarly considered their Norwood and Assiniboine bridge projects “absolutely necessary,” mainly because of increased traffic across the older bridges from St. Boniface, Dawson Trail, St. Mary’s Road, and St. Anne’s Road. The two cities also anticipated that the bridges would form a connecting link to the Trans-Canada Highway. Likewise, responding to criticism of the construction of Alberta’s Bowker Building in 1934, Superintendent of Buildings D. E. McDonald argued that it was “an absolute necessity” because the province had been “up against it for office space.” The building, of course, was also “a great assistance especially to the labor men in the City of Edmonton and provided employment for a great number.”

This is not to suggest that everyone agreed on which projects were necessary, or even useful. In December 1931, for example, Edmonton’s city council sought to have the construction of a bridge over the Rat Creek ravine built as a relief project under the Unemployment and Farm Relief Act. Despite heavy promotion in the Edmonton Journal’s editorial pages and the clear support of city council, M. J. Warner of the Cromdale
Community League registered the league’s opposition to the project, insisting that the ravine be filled in instead. Both the Highlands Community League and the Westmount Community League agreed, arguing that a fill-in would offer the local unemployed more work and could employ more men. The Eastwood Community League, however, was “unanimously in favour” of the proposed bridge, but only if it was built with reinforced concrete since this would “employ local labour entirely.” The League argued that although a steel structure might last longer, most of its fabrication would occur elsewhere, doing Edmonton’s local unemployed no good. A steel bridge, the league continued, “would not add the colour or beauty of a concrete structure.”

As for the fill-in proposal, Mrs. C. W. Lee, secretary of the Local Council of Women, “strenuously objected to this bridge being replaced by a fill” because it would destroy “the beauty of the surroundings of a natural park.” The Edmonton Art Club similarly recommended that no ravines be filled unless and when the city grew so large as to require the space for residences or businesses. Like Mrs. Lee, the club wished to retain the area’s natural beauty. In the end, despite the pockets of local opposition, the bridge project went ahead as a steel structure. The bridge was completed some four months later and opened to public traffic on 30 April 1932. We can only speculate what the city council thought of the opposition, but it seems likely that any opposition was too weak, or considered so by council, to make much difference.

Benefits for Business

In addition to providing work for the unemployed, work relief went some way toward maintaining the many contracting and construction companies operating in the cities. Because private sector building all but stopped during the Depression, bridge and building construction, storm sewer work, and graveling and paving jobs helped these businesses survive. Seeking the contract for the bridge project in Winnipeg, for example, the Dominion Bridge Company appealed to Premier Bracken. “What I have most at heart,” the company’s vice-president wrote in October 1930, “is the fact that this is the only work coming
up in this territory which would enable us to keep our plant working
during the winter months.” If the contract went elsewhere, “we will be
compelled to close down our plant.” In seeking a contract for supply-
ing brick for Winnipeg’s Civic Auditorium in February 1932, the man-
ager of Alsip Brick, Tile, and Lumber Company similarly noted that
“our men are suffering in common with every one else, and we plead
their case for them.”

In fact, these firms consistently appealed to the cities and prov-
inces, especially when they learned that work relief projects had been
approved at senior levels of government. Upon learning of Edmonton’s
plans to construct a reinforced concrete bridge crossing Groat Creek
ravine early in 1931, for instance, the Poole Construction Company
offered to do the job for a competitive price of $1,900, promising that
“all labour would be supplied under relief conditions and material by
or through the city.” Consulting with the city’s chief engineer as to
whether Poole should be awarded the contract, City Commissioner
Leslie discovered that the city’s engineering department had already
made a start on the bridge using its own employees. In this case, even
though the chief engineer believed that Poole could do the job just
as well, the company’s offer was turned down. Contracting out could
prove to be a time-consuming process, and the bridge needed to be
completed before the end of April or Edmonton would risk losing the
75 percent contribution from the federal and provincial governments
under the Unemployment and Farm Relief Act.

Work relief generally took the form of construction. Not only did
construction work employ large numbers of men, but it also aided the
construction industry, whose general economic health was a key indi-
cator of municipal prosperity. Fearful of losing businesses and facto-
ries and their taxes, especially the general wealth they represented and
the employment they generated, the cities had a real economic interest
in maintaining the impression that work was going on, that they were
dealing with the problem. “Enterprise breeds enterprise,” the editor of
the Edmonton Bulletin pointed out in November 1929. “Lethargy induces
stagnation. A progressive city encourages private investment and draws
population. Nobody wants to live or invest money in a city whose people
seem to take for granted that their community has run its course and reached its maximum development."

Prescriptive letters to city administrators also almost invariably counselled work relief over direct relief as the best method to deal with the unemployment problem. The heads of contracting concerns and building associations, steel mill and quarry owners, lumber operators and coal dealers all expressed a consistent desire for the institution of public works relief over the dole. W. H. Carter of Winnipeg’s Carter-Halls-Aldinger construction company castigated Manitoba’s deputy minister of Public Works for moving the province’s support in 1933 from work relief to direct relief. “As to direct relief,” he wrote, “you and the Dominion Government have employed the best brains of the continent to study the cheapest method of administering direct relief; you have this down to a science. The same thought has not been given to a relief works programme.” Secretary Lorne Mellish of the Edmonton Builders’ Exchange was pleased to learn that the city planned to borrow money from the federal government for a works program to avoid relying on direct relief. Edmonton’s Western Supplies Limited similarly believed it “very desirable to proceed with some such useful work at this time and the city receive the lasting benefits and reduce to some extent the expense in connection with unproductive relief.” The company was even willing to supply the city with waterworks-related material on credit, to be paid for in better times, to “provide some employment now when it is needed so badly.”

The Saskatchewan Association of Architects supported work relief because it would benefit not only unemployed men in Saskatoon but also anyone involved in constructing a new building, from general contractors and subcontractors, to mechanics, labourers, supply men, teamsters, hotel and restaurant keepers, railway workers, and businessmen generally. The Winnipeg offices of the Canada Ingot Iron Company made a similar case to Manitoba’s minister of Public Works in September 1931. The company, specializing in producing corrugated metal culverts for sewerage and drain projects, complained that it was not receiving an equitable share of provincial and municipal orders for relief work. If the provincial and municipal governments failed to make...
more orders, the company warned, many of its employees would be added to the unemployment list. Winnipeg’s Building Trades Council, for its part, protested that some “so-called ‘work-schemes’” involved costs that far outweighed their value, resulting in high public expenditures with a correspondingly small “social value” to either the unemployed or the city at large. But the same objection could not be raised against house building. “Apart altogether from the economic aspect of housing schemes,” the council argued in September 1933, “it is surely a State obligation as well as a Health necessity to see to it that the whole of its people is decently housed.”

_The Work Ethic_

What also made work relief preferable to direct relief was the difficulty that many Prairie residents had with the idea that the unemployed should get something for nothing, that the urban jobless might enjoy wages without offering up any work or time or effort in exchange. These sentiments emerged early, spread widely, and remained consistent throughout the early Depression years among relief policy-makers. Winnipeg’s Alderman R. Maybank reported to the secretary of the Civic Unemployment Relief Committee, “Our own matter is peculiarly the question of getting further assistance to defray administration costs and to do away with the system of giving relief without any work in return.” Maybank added that, according to another Winnipeg alderman, even Gideon Robertson, the federal labour minister, felt the same way: Robertson “personally thought it would be very much better if we could arrange some such plan because he quite agreed with the representations that giving something for nothing is destructive of morale.” Edmonton’s city council agreed that “all men in receipt of relief should be asked to do some work in return.” Saskatoon’s Mayor Hair likewise asserted that “the dole suggestion is entirely out of the question.” Manitoba’s unemployment relief policy stated it most explicitly: “Work is the cure for unemployment, rather than ‘Direct Relief’ which is simply a dissimulation of the ‘Dole.’” This sentiment persisted, even as the Depression worsened. Mayor
“Fightin’ Joe” Clarke of Edmonton, for example, suggested in 1935 that “the average citizen . . . whilst sympathetic to meeting the actual necessities of the unemployed has a deep aversion to this method of relief and invariably insists upon some quid pro quo in the form of work in return for the relief provided.” A short time later, Clarke declared that he did not want to “encourage . . . any recipients of cash relief from the taxpayers to think that they do not have to earn the money they receive.”

The economic, political, and social benefits of work relief projects underwritten in part by federal and provincial funding were not lost on the city officials in charge of relief works, who consequently tried to squeeze as many items as possible related to their projects into the tripartite work relief agreements. But keeping a close eye on city reimbursement statements were federal and provincial accountants and comptrollers, whose task it was to ensure that the cities were not taking unfair advantage of government contributions. While generally supportive of the work ethic, federal and provincial officials indicated very clearly what their funds could and could not be used for. Typically, such funds could not be applied toward the purchase of any materials or equipment—graders, tractors, hoists, shovels, assorted tools—that would have a residual life beyond a project’s completion, although some small compensation was offered to cover the rental of some items. Nor, in the case of Winnipeg’s Civic Auditorium, would the province pay for furnishings or other equipment inside the building. The same was true for any departmental expenses or overhead costs. In Edmonton, for example, this meant that fully 10 percent of any relief project’s cost fell outside of its relief work agreements with the federal and provincial governments. Where cities did submit expenses above and beyond what those governments regarded as legitimate, senior officials typically thwarted their efforts. “From time to time certificates of expenditure are received which include amounts for equipment . . . which have a residual value,” federal Commissioner of Unemployment Relief Harry Hereford admonished Manitoba officials in 1932. “It has been ruled that the Dominion government will not contribute to the cost of items of this nature.” In that particular case, the city was not reimbursed for those items.
PUBLIC WORKS RELIEF PROJECTS: THE FIRST UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF ACT

Winnipeg’s Twin Bridges

On 4 September 1930, just a few short weeks before the Unemployment Relief Act passed in Ottawa, Manitoba’s Public Works minister met with representatives of the cities of Winnipeg and St. Boniface to “find some way of financing the building of the Assiniboine and Norwood Bridges.” The proposal had three parts: demolishing two narrow bridges constructed earlier in the century; opening and widening the streets leading to the proposed spans, a co-operative venture involving both Winnipeg and St. Boniface; and constructing the two new bridges themselves. Engineers from both cities estimated the cost of the project at a little over $1 million and expected the work to provide employment for some four hundred men.

Everyone at the meeting agreed with Winnipeg’s Alderman Honeyman that the construction project was probably “the best method of meeting the [unemployment] problem.” But everyone also recognized that, as Honeyman pointed out, “it would be impossible in these hard times to have the rate-payers pay for this expensive scheme and the only way we can undertake it is to bring as attractive a scheme as possible before the people.” In fact, Honeyman’s colleague on council, Alderman A. J. Doucet, was skeptical of the whole scheme. “It will be many months before anything can be done on the project,” he said. “If 1000 men, which I consider a minimum, were employed on the construction work, it would cost $3000 a day for wages, taking $3 a day as the average wage. It would take at least 100 days to complete the work, making $300,000 for wages.” Alderman Murchison of St. Boniface agreed: “If the federal government cannot see its way to financing the whole project with convenient terms for repayment of our share of the cost, then I think we can go no further.”

Making relief work programs attractive to city ratepayers chiefly meant spreading their costs across as many jurisdictions as possible. Like other public works proposals drawn up that autumn in cities across the Prairies, the joint Winnipeg–St. Boniface bridge project depended
heavily on contributions from the federal and provincial governments. Winnipeg and St. Boniface certainly intended “to take advantage of the Ottawa Unemployment scheme.” Manitoba’s Public Works minister, W. R. Clubb, told the representatives of the two municipalities that if Ottawa agreed to contribute to the bridge construction, the provincial government would “give some assistance.”

The idea for the two spans was based on studies of current and future traffic patterns conducted in both Winnipeg and St. Boniface. Those studies concluded that both bridges would serve the two municipalities immediately, as well as in the near future when, or so city planners expected, the main Trans-Canada Highway would enter the area across the spans. At that time, the main Trans-Canada Highway followed a course northward, veered east to Whitemouth, and then turned south where it connected with Ontario. “I think that as years go by the present location of the Highway will cut straight through to the Springfield road,” Honeyman pointed out, “and therefore this bridge is needed not only for the present needs but for future needs.”

The idea was to construct a main arterial route running from St. Boniface on the south side of the Assiniboine to Winnipeg on the river’s north side, just west of where it intersects with the Red. Two bridges were required because the route would cross both rivers.

The twin spans, city planners and the two city councils believed, would increase traffic through the cities, enhancing the wealth of both. This was a point that business interests in both cities insisted be made directly to Ottawa. “When we ask for financial support of the federal government, the need for unemployment relief must be stressed,” David Campbell, the representative of the four trade boards in the two cities, urged those present at the meeting. “It must also be stressed that the project will be a connecting link in a federal highway.” A Manitoba Free Press reporter concurred, arguing that construction of the two bridges “would be links in a new highway from Winnipeg to the south, running down the east side of the Red River, or via Pliney to the border.”

Easier access to American markets, the writer reasoned, could only be good for Winnipeg. Importantly, the bridges also promised to strengthen transportation and communication networks between St. Boniface and
Winnipeg, a connection that the Winnipeg Electric Company was happy to support. The company offered $50,000 to the project for “the laying of rails and other railroad equipment across both structures” and for realigning tracks from the “north side of the Assiniboine bridge into the Main Street street car houses.”

With the city councils’ arguments in hand, Premier Bracken and a delegation of representatives from both cities, together with the province’s minister and deputy minister of Labour, travelled to Ottawa the following day, and on 1 October 1930, they entered into an agreement with the federal government. Though city officials welcomed the federal and provincial commitments of $170,000 each, the news resulted in squabbling between the city councils of Winnipeg and St. Boniface. Perhaps not surprisingly, disputes centred around how to divide the costs of the municipal share of the projects. Cost-sharing arrangements for the Main Street Bridge on the Winnipeg side of the Assiniboine was not in dispute: Winnipeg would assume the entire $240,000 municipal share, leaving $120,000 each to the federal and provincial governments. But the Norwood Bridge crossing the Red required the two cities to divide the $280,000 municipal share. In earlier meetings of representatives for both cities, it had been agreed that because citizens of St. Boniface were more likely than Winnipeg residents to rely on the Norwood Bridge, St. Boniface would contribute two-thirds of the municipal share. In mid-October, St. Boniface’s city council balked, insisting that the two cities each contribute half of the municipal share of the cost of both bridges. Winnipeg’s Alderman E. D. Honeyman urged a speedy resolution to the dispute, suggesting that “should the electorate of Winnipeg or St. Boniface turn down the proposition their one chance at securing a half million dollar improvement at half-price will be lost forever.” One month later, the two cities were still deadlocked, but now St. Boniface suggested that if it paid two-thirds of the municipal share, then 80 per cent of the unskilled labour employed on the job should come from its unemployment rolls. Not until the end of November did the city councils sort out their differences, agreeing that St. Boniface would pay two-thirds of the municipal share on the understanding that two-thirds of the unskilled labour would be St. Boniface men.
Once the agreement had been struck, Winnipeg’s Civic Unemployment Relief Committee appointed a special committee to get the project started. One of the committee’s first steps was to appoint A. J. Taunton, a member of the Board of Engineers, to serve as resident engineer for both bridges at a salary of $500 per month. The appointment was critical: Taunton held primary responsibility for arranging purchase orders and requisitions, certifying payrolls, and following procedures for passing accounts and establishing progress estimates. He was also responsible for making recommendations to the committee on tenders received from companies eager to carry out the various tasks associated with the bridges’ construction, as well as for overseeing the entire bidding process. All contracts, ranging from suppliers for piers and abutments to steel fabrication and erection, passed first across Taunton’s desk, and the committee, relying heavily on Taunton’s engineering expertise, awarded the contracts based solely on his recommendations.\(^9\) On the engineer’s advice, the committee issued tenders for steel fabrication, having decided to construct the bridges using a steel superstructure, and accepted the Dominion Bridge Company’s bid of $136 per ton.\(^2\) Shortly thereafter, some three hundred unemployed steelworkers were busy at the bridge company’s shop fabricating steel for the bridges. Early in the new year, another three hundred unemployed men would find work doing the actual construction.\(^3\)

**Saskatoon’s Subway and Sewerage Work**

Not surprisingly, other cities followed steps similar to those established in Winnipeg. When news of the Dominion scheme reached Saskatoon, for example, Mayor John Hair presented the provincial government in Regina with an ambitious $700,000 unemployment relief work scheme prepared by the city’s engineering department. The proposal included a street subway, storm sewer work, and a new wing for the City Hospital.\(^4\) Saskatoon went through the same process as Winnipeg, submitting its work relief program to the province, which in turn sought approval for funds from the federal Unemployment Relief Act appropriation. The province approved the city’s plan of $300,000 for the subway and
$150,000 for the storm sewer work, both of which promised employment to Saskatoon’s unskilled jobless labourers, but dismissed the $250,000 proposal for the new hospital wing. In defending its decision, the province argued that the hospital project would employ primarily tradesmen, and Saskatoon tradesmen were already engaged on other work throughout the city. The money, provincial authorities explained, would be better spent on a building in Regina.95

The “subway,” essentially a rail bridge crossing over Nineteenth Street near Saskatoon’s downtown core, was designed to enhance the flow of goods and traffic through the city. Since the subway fell under the terms of the Unemployment Relief Act, the federal and provincial governments each contributed $50,000 to its cost. Because it would be used by the railway companies, the Canadian Pacific and the Canadian National railways contributed a further $50,000 apiece to the project, leaving $100,000 to be paid by the city.96

Edmonton’s Roadway Improvements

Edmonton’s work relief scheme, proposed that same autumn, did not share the grand scale of the other two cities’ programs, nor did the city authorities show much enthusiasm for the federal unemployment legislation. Edmonton’s wan response to the Unemployment Relief Act was due in part to the engineering department’s engagement in nearly $1 million worth of public works projects, mainly road improvements, throughout the city as part of the city’s normal operations through the fall and winter of 1930. Although the work was not explicitly directed at the unemployment problem, it nevertheless lowered the jobless rate considerably in the city. Another reason was the city council’s hesitance to commit the city to millions of dollars in costs. Alderman Findlay, for one, urged caution. “The council should go slow” in endorsing any proposal for work relief under the new act, he pointed out in late September 1930, “as it might mean the saddling of the city with ten or twenty millions of dollars expenditure.”97 In the end, the city embarked on a modest work relief program under the legislation, with the same vision as that of authorities in Winnipeg and Saskatoon: improved
communication and transportation systems within the city. Through the summer and early fall of 1930, the Alberta government had been busy constructing highways radiating from Edmonton in all four directions. Business boosters in the city, such as the editors of the *Edmonton Bulletin*, believed that the city could best complement the new provincial highways by connecting them “at the boundaries with equally good or better roadways leading to the business centre of the city.” By 17 September, the city’s engineering department had drawn up plans for more than $200,000 of road construction, paving, grading, and graving. The largest and most important of these plans was the paving of Calgary Trail on the city’s south side to meet up with the new provincial arterial highway connecting Edmonton and Calgary.

Edmonton’s Calgary Trail improvements, like Saskatoon’s subway project and Winnipeg’s bridges, represented city officials’ efforts to bind their unemployment relief goals to their city’s current and future infrastructure needs. Their decision to focus those efforts on improved transportation systems is not surprising. The opening decades of the twentieth century had seen the dawn of the mighty automobile age, and automobiles, of course, demanded serviceable roads. Cars and trucks were interesting curiosities at the beginning of the century, but by the late 1920s, they had become critical means of both personal and commercial transport. It was the First World War in particular, according to American historian Merrill J. Roberts, that illustrated the important benefits of road transport. Belligerents on both sides made use of some 130,000 motor trucks for transporting supplies and troops to great effect through the course of the war. Furthermore, the war made accessing rail transport in North America more difficult, mainly because rail traffic was largely dedicated to moving supplies and troops toward harbours where steamers waited to carry them to the conflagration overseas, forcing Americans and Canadians to rely on alternate means of transportation.

After the war, the idea of road transport was on the rise. The moderately strong economy of the 1920s, coupled with a trend that saw businesses maintaining smaller inventories in-house and consequently requiring more shipments of goods more often, made motor transport even more attractive. Saskatchewan’s experience is telling. The province
registered only fifty-four new motor vehicle licenses in 1907. By 1920, it had issued more than sixty thousand. Truck transport was more specific, more direct, and faster than rail transport. While the journey of rail-delivered goods ended at the railway depot, motor trucks could manoeuvre city streets and ship goods directly to the merchant’s or consumer’s door. Finally, automobile prices declined steadily through the 1920s, making them more affordable to more prospective motorists.

THE DEEPENING DEPRESSION: THE SECOND UNEMPLOYMENT RELIEF ACT

By the autumn of 1931, the economic situation had grown worse, and the number of jobless larger. Serious signs of problems had appeared in the spring and summer of that year as the federal Labour minister, Senator Gideon Robertson, toured the West. Upon his return to Ottawa, he described alarming conditions suggesting that neither Bennett’s celebrated tariff nor his government’s Unemployment Relief Act had made any significant dent in the unemployment situation. The federal government’s Unemployment and Farm Relief Act was designed, according to James Struthers, “to deal with the crisis in the West” and was “rushed into Parliament on Dominion Day.”

Once again, cities in the West drew up programs of relief based on estimates made by their engineering departments and city planners. When word of the new federal relief scheme arrived in Saskatoon, for example, the city applied for approval of another $300,000 storm sewer project. Along with the submission, Mayor Hair reminded provincial officials how badly Saskatoon’s jobless were faring, estimating that out of a total of fifteen hundred unemployed married men in the city, fifty were “very distressing cases.” Considering the acute needs of these men and their families, Hair asked the province if the city could begin work on enough of the sewer project to provide employment for those fifty men. Despite the fact that the new act had yet to be officially enacted by Parliament, the province approved $30,000 toward the project.
Saskatoon's Broadway Bridge

For Saskatoon, the sewer project was only the first part of its unemployment work relief construction plan. Municipal authorities had long viewed a bridge crossing the South Saskatchewan from the increasingly popular Broadway district on the south side to the downtown core on the north as an ideal relief project. In fact, ever since A. E. K. Bunnel, a Toronto city planner hired by the City of Saskatoon to advise on needed infrastructure works, had suggested the bridge in 1930, city officials had seemed to be biding their time, waiting for the right moment to introduce the plan. A new bridge, city officials believed, would not only offer a much needed conduit between the Nutana residential area and the downtown core but would also relieve traffic on the decrepit and dangerously narrow Nineteenth Street Bridge. “The reason for building the bridge in the first place,” City Clerk Tomlinson wrote provincial officials in December 1932, a month after the new bridge opened, “was to remove street car tracks from the existing traffic bridge on account of the danger in operating over such a narrow bridge.” The necessity of the new bridge became clear in April 1932, a few months after construction began, when a streetcar jumped the track on the older bridge. The city clerk believed that it was only “through sheer luck a serious accident did not result.”

Shortly after Ottawa announced the new relief act in July 1931, Mayor Hair, City Commissioner Leslie, and Chief Engineer Archibald discussed potential capital works that would provide employment for the estimated fifteen hundred jobless married residents expected by October. The project would need to be large enough to sustain this number of unemployed men for twelve months. The bridge fit the bill.

By September, the number of jobless married men needing employment had grown to twenty-four hundred. Even given Chief Engineer Archibald’s estimation that 25 percent of this number were physically unfit for manual labour, the city still had to find employment for nearly two thousand men. Rumours trickling down to Saskatoon’s city council through one of the city’s Conservative MPs suggested that the federal government would contribute 50 percent of a project’s cost to a maximum of $350,000. The city’s engineering department estimated
the bridge project’s cost at $1.2 million, and city council agreed to top up any amount over the $700,000 limit imposed by the legislation. Gaining federal and provincial approval for the project, though, was no easy matter. Despite submitting the project to provincial authorities in early September, the city had heard nothing from Ottawa by late October. As a Star-Phoenix writer observed, “The delay in receiving word from Ottawa as to the building of the new bridge has created considerable apprehension that it is not meeting with the approval of federal authorities or that financial conditions will not permit of the undertaking.”

A report leaked to the Star-Phoenix by an eastern correspondent the next day, however, suggested that neither federal approval nor financial conditions were the cause of the delay. Although the provincial government had forwarded the bridge proposal to the federal Department of Labour, the paper reported that provincial authorities “did not especially press or suggest that this work be undertaken.” An indignant Premier Anderson responded to the charge almost immediately.

The statement being made at Saskatoon that the provincial government has not approved of the proposed bridge is entirely erroneous. The whole matter of bridges, including the Saskatoon bridge and those bridges over the Saskatchewan River, was placed before Hon. G. D. Robertson, minister of labor, when he was in Regina last. The request of the City of Saskatoon was also taken up in Ottawa by the attorney general on his recent visit east. The Saskatchewan government was not prepared to recommend an expenditure of $1,200,000 but has recommended an expenditure of $1,000,000.

Anderson’s strong public display of support for the new bridge effectively eliminated any lingering doubts about the success of the application. But city officials had counted on and planned for a $1.2 million bridge. The $200,000 shortfall compelled city engineers in charge of the bridge’s design to return to the drawing board and reduce the project’s costs accordingly.

In the early evening of 4 November 1931, Saskatoon MP F. R. MacMillan wired Mayor Hair, unofficially advising him of the federal
government’s intended $350,000 commitment to the bridge project. With both federal and provincial approval essentially secured, Saskatoon’s city relief machine ground into action. City Clerk Tomlinson issued tenders for the construction, gravel, cement, and steel required for the bridge. Chief Engineer Archibald, in consultation with Dean C. J. Mackenzie of the University of Saskatchewan’s engineering department, finalized the bridge’s design and implementation plans, and the city council, together with the provincial government and the Local Government Board, discussed and debated financing arrangements. The city council’s plans, based on engineering department estimates, anticipated a debenture repayment period of fifty years at 5 percent interest—an amount that many ratepayers would doubtless have balked at under normal economic conditions. But, as a Star-Phoenix writer observed late that October, “while the ratepayers of this city are not unanimous in their opinion as to the desirability of undertaking such an ambitious project at the present time, opposition to the project has not been particularly noticeable.”

Saskatoon’s ratepayers confirmed that assessment nearly one month later, voting to pass the debenture bylaw by a margin of four to one.

On a clear, crisp, bitterly cold Saturday morning, Mayor Hair returned to Saskatoon on 12 December following a three-day conference with provincial authorities in Regina. He carried with him a signed agreement authorizing the city to begin construction of the Broadway Bridge under the terms of the Unemployment and Farm Relief Act. That afternoon, Saskatoon’s city council awarded the bridge construction contract to the R. J. Arrand Construction Company, whose bid of nearly $262,000 was more than $22,000 below that of the next lowest bidder. Anticipating the project’s approval, the city engineering department had issued tenders for the job and had received wildly varying bids from contractors. “The tender of the lowest and successful bidder was less than 50% that of the highest,” Dean Mackenzie later recalled, “and the nearest responsible bid was 33% higher than that of the lowest bidder.” Speculating on the reasons for the wide spread among bids for the same job, Mackenzie suggested that the labour and material conditions imposed by the provincial and federal governments on the construction...
The wages of relief project “appeared to contractors to carry heavy risks” and led some contractors to incorporate compensatory amounts into their bids.\textsuperscript{118}

The most important of these conditions, not surprisingly, related to the relief workers employed on the project and underscored the city’s intention that the construction of the bridge was first and foremost a relief project designed to provide maximum employment to the city’s jobless. To this end, the contract kept construction machinery to a bare minimum so that the bulk of the work would rely on hand labour.\textsuperscript{119} This meant that the contractor could use no machinery other than cement mixers, pile drivers, hoists, and air hammers. Even the concrete that would fill out the bridge’s superstructure could not be poured from cement trucks; it would instead be mixed on one side of the river bank, put into wheelbarrows, wheeled by hand to the work site, and dumped directly into the forms some twelve hundred feet away. Furthermore, the city, not the contractor, purchased cement, aggregate, and steel directly from local suppliers “in order to provide as much local labor as possible.”\textsuperscript{120} Following purchase, those materials were shipped to the work site on local trucks driven by relief workers. Once at the site, all materials passed through the hands of relief workers; stone was crushed, sand unloaded, even steel bent “on the site by the engineering department, using local labor.”\textsuperscript{121} The contractor was also required to rely almost entirely on relief workers taken from the city’s relief rolls; he was allowed only three of his own men on the job: a superintendent, a general foreman, and an accountant. All other workers were to be rotated according to relief schedules designed by the city engineering department according to family size, and no worker was allowed to work more than eight hours on any given day. Hourly wages were set by the city at a minimum of forty-five cents for common labour, ninety cents for carpenters, and one dollar for electricians.\textsuperscript{122} Finally, while the contractor was permitted to fire any worker for cause, “the city engineer was made the final court of appeal in all disputes.”\textsuperscript{123}

Clearly dominating the job’s work distribution was George D. Archibald, the city’s chief engineer. As far as possible, he organized the labour like a regular construction contractor giving work to the unemployed rather than like a charity giving alms to the poor. Archibald,
together with the contractor, R. J. Arrand, had a bridge to build, not a boondoggle to keep idle men occupied. In this spirit, their attention from the beginning focused on the practical matters of getting the job done. Chief among these was the time restriction imposed both by federal dictates and by the local weather. The federal government insisted that all relief projects carried out under the 1931 Unemployment and Farm Relief Act be completed no later than mid-December 1932. If the

Figure 5. The construction of Saskatoon’s Broadway Bridge, 1932. Relief workers in a cofferdam lay the foundations for the bridge’s second pier, using hand shovels to carve through the dirt and hard blue clay. In the upper left is the pump house, where river water was pumped out of the cofferdam. City of Saskatoon Archives, 1104-003-006.
engineers wanted to remain within their time limit, they would have to work fast. What’s more, by the time construction began, the mid-winter weather had turned bitterly cold, promising to make the work difficult for the many relief workers employed on the job. Added to this were the constant threat of an early spring ice break-up and the possibility of June flooding. Over the twelve months ahead, the planning team would have to organize materials and labour by drawing on their previous experience with local seasonal changes. During the first construction stage, from New Year’s Day to March 15 over the eleven coldest weeks of the year, they would take advantage of the thick ice covering the river to construct the bridge’s six piers, four of which would stand in the river.124

To get this first critical job completed in time, work ran continuously day and night, even through Sundays and holidays, according to Mackenzie.125 Workers first erected a light scaffolding across the river and then constructed wooden forms that sat on the river bed and jutted out of the ice; they used cofferdams to clear out the river water from the area where the piers would stand. Nine thousand cubic yards of concrete, prepared on the banks, was then transported by hand cart along the scaffolding to the forms, into which it was poured and left to dry. At one point, the temperature dropped in just a few hours to less than –30°C, accompanied by a “biting northwest wind.” The cold threatened the integrity of the concrete, which had to maintain a temperature of at least 32°C in order to pour properly. Workers hurriedly wheeled barrows of concrete along twelve hundred feet of rickety open-air scaffolding twenty feet above the ice to pour it into the pier forms before it froze.126

After mid-March, even though the river ice typically did not begin to break up until at least mid-April, the planning team avoided most river work for fear of flooding. In previous years, the river had risen by as much as twenty feet between April and June, and the engineers knew that such a flood would threaten the whole structure. Between mid-March and June, then, the planning team set workers on the approach spans and retaining walls on either side of the river bank. Despite the coming spring, several feet of frost and ice still remained on the banks, and a good deal of excavation was required to clear the area. The false-work and forms for the two arches over the banks were constructed next,
Figure 6. The elaborate falsework of the Broadway Bridge’s arches, 1932. Workers mixed cement on the riverbank of the South Saskatchewan River, loaded it into wheelbarrows, and then manoeuvred the wheelbarrows along the narrow wooden trundle before dumping it into the pier forms below. City of Saskatoon Archives, 1104-003-045.
leaving the arches over the river and the surface of the twelve-hundred-foot span to be constructed after the threat of flooding had passed.\textsuperscript{127}

By October, the bridge’s five arches had been completed, and the pavement and street railway tracks had been laid on the bridge’s surface. Some eleven months after the project had begun, the Broadway Bridge opened to public traffic on 11 November 1932. The bridge’s overall aesthetic was subdued. In the words of its designer C. J. Mackenzie, “careful attention was given to aesthetic considerations, and especially in view of

\textit{Figure 7.} The arch work for the Broadway Bridge, 1932. When the photograph was taken, the bridge’s official opening was just over two months away. City of Saskatoon Archives, 1104-003-050.
the nature of the undertaking, all pretentious ornamentation, terminal pylons, etc., were avoided and reliance placed in the inherent beauty of simple bold outlines and proportions.”

**Edmonton’s Multiple Projects**

Like city engineers across the country, Edmonton’s chief engineer, A. W. Haddow, was called upon by city council to draw up a list of possible relief works in anticipation of the new federal Unemployment and Farm Relief Act. The engineer listed twenty-three items totalling a little more than $1 million, comparable to the other cities’ plans that summer, but none among them was on as grand a scale as Saskatoon’s bridge or Winnipeg’s auditorium. Haddow instead proposed a series of sewer and drainage projects, some grading, boulevard, and graveling work, and the construction of small bridges over portions of the city’s extensive ravine system along the river valley. Most of the individual projects on the list cost considerably less than $50,000. Compared to Saskatoon’s Broadway Bridge and Winnipeg’s Civic Auditorium, with estimated costs of nearly $1 million each, Edmonton’s plans to spread its resources across a number of smaller projects were conservative, to say the least.

The city commissioner reported to city council on 18 August 1931 that Edmonton’s program of work had been prepared “primarily to provide the maximum percentage of labor keeping in view also at the same time the permanent requirements of the City.” Here was the city planner at his most pragmatic. That work relief was meant to provide the maximum amount of work to the maximum number of unemployed married men was a given, but work relief was also designed explicitly to fulfill present and future city needs. The city’s aldermen concurred with the plans, and the following day, Edmonton’s mayor, with council’s approval, travelled to Calgary to meet with Prime Minister R. B. Bennett and representatives of the provincial government to discuss their participation in the city’s work relief plans. Significantly, the council members also appointed Chief Engineer Haddow to join the mayor at the Calgary conference, thus revealing their anticipation of his critical role in work relief negotiations.

Building Cities
Upon his return to Edmonton some days later, Haddow reported to City Commissioner Mitchell that the federal and provincial governments were “willing to contribute substantially” to the city’s work relief plans. This was happy news, considering that the city’s relief officer had earlier mentioned to the engineer that some three thousand married men were unemployed and on relief in the city, and that their number would not decrease until at least April of the following year. But even with federal and provincial funding, the city could not provide for all unemployed married men on relief. One possible solution, the engineer suggested, was to institute “some part time arrangement” so that more men could be employed in relief work. Instead of each man working full-time at the city’s minimum hourly wage of fifty cents, each man would work half-time, or even quarter-time.\textsuperscript{132}

\textit{Winnipeg’s Civic Auditorium}

Winnipeg likewise initiated a new series of work relief projects in the autumn of 1931 in answer to the federal Unemployment and Farm Relief Act. After considering a series of possible construction projects, the city settled on nearly $1.5 million worth of work, including a new relief office, sewer work, the Sargent Baths, and two more new bridges at Salter Street and St. James. Upon approval from the province and the federal government, the new schemes got underway, and by October 1931, work crews taken from the city’s five thousand unemployed married men were busy working on the relief office and the sewers.\textsuperscript{133} Despite the size of the projects begun that autumn, the city still had its sights set on a new Civic Auditorium. In early October, Winnipeg’s mayor, Ralph Webb, spoke informally with Premier Bracken about it, and the matter was taken up in the provincial Cabinet. The Cabinet subsequently approved the auditorium, although only offering a little more than $150,000 toward the project; the province was prepared to submit the proposal to the federal government if the city was able to come up with approximately $350,000 toward the cost. With the federal contribution of 50 percent of the total cost, the city would have nearly $1 million to complete the project.\textsuperscript{134}
Following some haggling over cost sharing through most of October, all three levels of government finally agreed that Winnipeg and the Province of Manitoba would each contribute 25 percent of the project’s cost, and the federal government would cover the remaining 50 percent on the assumption that the total cost would be $832,000. The province, though, insisted that the men be rotated on the job such that
no one man would work more than one week in three. City engineers and architects, moreover, would have to submit construction specifications, building plans, and all contract terms to both the province and the federal government. The city would also have to furnish the land and agree to have the building “substantially completed” by 1 May 1932.136

Work on the auditorium began almost immediately, with men clearing and grading the land upon which the building would stand and then rushing to complete the walls and roof before the first snowfall so that workers could stay relatively warm inside through the cold winter months. By late December, though, the project was running seriously over budget, and the city informed provincial officials that a further $100,000 was needed to finish the job. A large part of the problem revolved around higher-than-expected tenders received from city contractors for various parts of the job, including electricity and wiring, ventilation, plumbing, and stone construction. The province grudgingly contributed the additional $100,000, given that the project was well underway, but when the city again sought an increase in the budget, this time for another $32,000 for an all-stone building, the province balked. In a letter to the city clerk, Public Works Minister W. R. Clubb stated firmly, “The Provincial Government . . . is very desirous of having it definitely understood that the maximum price of all relief works must be considered as fixed and not subject to increase.” Turning down the city’s request, Clubb ordered “that a very careful canvass shall be made into all phases of the building with a view of effecting the greatest possible saving.”137

Following the province’s refusal, Winnipeg’s city council asked the engineering department, including the city architects, whether it would endorse any changes that might bring the cost down. The first to go from the auditorium plans was more than thirteen feet off the height of the main building, entirely eliminating the planned third floor. Chief architect G. W. Northwood explained that the change would not affect the auditorium’s “essential features.” It would, however, mean that the building’s upper balcony could not be built, reducing the main auditorium’s seating capacity from 4,500 to 4,150. A small antechamber off the main section’s south side would be retained, but a planned gallery would not. Any further savings, the architect maintained, would have to
come from the revised (and reduced) tenders submitted by the electrical and plumbing firms, and the companies supplying materials.138 One such supplier, the Alsip Brick, Tile, and Lumber Company, upon hearing news of the escalated costs of the auditorium, suggested that the city use brick and stone in the building’s construction rather than just stone. “The Stone men have had a pretty good inning in this relief work,” the company’s manager wrote in late February, “and there is no question . . . but that they will get a very large contract out of it.” Using a combined brick and stone construction “would make what we consider in our opinion, a much nicer building.”139 In the end, the city went with the all-stone construction, considering its cleaner line more fitting for a public auditorium.

NO SIMPLE ANSWERS: ALBERTA’S ADMINISTRATION BUILDING

Debates over construction materials on relief projects—and particularly who would supply them—could even provoke interprovincial squabbling. When the Alberta government, in December 1929, announced plans to build a new administration building as a relief project, it met with immediate—and threatening—reactions from interested parties outside the province. The gist of these reactions turned on whether the successful contractor should make plans to use Indiana limestone or Manitoba Tyndall limestone in the construction of the building. The provincial government, hoping for the lowest price for stone possible, issued a call for tenders to quarries in both Canada and the United States. Upon hearing of the intended tender process, Premier John Bracken of Manitoba angrily fired off a telegram to Alberta’s Premier John Brownlee: “We had hoped your government would follow [the] policy of Dominion and Manitoba governments by giving first preference to a Canadian product,” he admonished, “and thus materially aid in development of the country’s natural resources.”140 Tapestry limestone from Manitoba’s Tyndall region, Bracken pointed out, was widely used in Canadian construction projects and compared favourably with
Indiana limestone. His central message was clear: using a variety of limestone imported from Indiana when comparable limestone was available domestically in Manitoba undermined the national interest. One day later, on 27 December, Secretary J. M. Davidson of Manitoba’s Industrial Development Board wired Brownlee, again arguing that Manitoba limestone was “equal to imported product and is used in some of the finest buildings in Canada from coast to coast.” Interestingly, like Premier Bracken’s telegram of the day before, Davidson maintained that Manitoba limestone was equal to Indiana limestone in quality but stopped short of saying the same about the cost. Davidson ended his message by reminding Brownlee that Manitoba was “cooperating in finding markets for Alberta products” and that he hoped Alberta would “reciprocate by giving first preference to products from the West’s own economic area.”

Responding to Bracken’s telegram first, Brownlee sidestepped entirely the issue of whether the limestone should come from domestic or foreign suppliers. Instead, he pointed out that Tyndall quarries had been invited to tender for the contract and that the Alberta government would make a decision “when the tenders are opened.” It was not until Manitoba’s Industrial Development Board made public through the Alberta press their protest, and that of the Manitoba government, against Alberta’s tender process that Brownlee addressed the issue directly in a letter to Premier Bracken: “This [press] report stressed the fact that Manitoba was consuming a great deal of Alberta coal and that there should be reciprocity between Provinces. . . . The coal men of this Province feel they are receiving little, if any, support from either your Government or the business firms who presumably support the Winnipeg Industrial Association.” In the end, Alberta decided to use Tyndall limestone from Manitoba “to assist as much as possible in stabilizing industrial conditions,” even though the Indiana stone tender was considerably lower. Furthermore, the Indiana stone required some finishing that would have been done in the province and would have provided $25,000 to $35,000 in wages to Alberta workers. In another letter to Bracken, Brownlee concluded by expressing the hope that the Manitoba government would “continue to assist us in efforts to extend our coal market in your Province.”
On one level, the Alberta government intended its administration building to provide the local jobless with work, but as the interprovincial exchange between Brownlee and Bracken makes clear, relief work entailed a good deal more than state aid to unemployed workers. The construction of the million-dollar building made good economic sense for the province. The cost of renting space for provincial departments in privately owned office buildings throughout the city came to more than $48,000 per year, and the province would probably have had to find additional space to accommodate offices associated with the newly acquired natural resource rights. However, in moving all provincial departments to the new administration building, the province left substantial vacancies in seven office buildings in the city; the owners of these private buildings could no longer count on regular rent payments from the province.

Municipal officials in Edmonton encountered a similar problem when in 1934 they considered approaching the federal government about the possibility of initiating a purely federal relief construction project. Future senator W. A. Griesbach warned city officials away from the idea. “There may be opposition to new public buildings in Edmonton,” he suggested to Mayor Daniel Knott, “because they have the effect of emptying certain office buildings and therefore making it difficult for owners of public buildings to meet their municipal taxes and it reduces rentals in office buildings.”

By the end of 1932, most of the major work relief programs carried on in Canadian cities under the Unemployment and Farm Relief Act had been completed. Two of the larger ones discussed above—Saskatoon’s Broadway Bridge and Winnipeg’s Civic Auditorium—held their official openings well after the structures were substantially finished. But the soaring relief costs that had long overwhelmed municipalities across the Prairies had begun to take their toll on the federal and provincial governments. In fact, it became clear as early as the summer of 1932 that the federal government had no plans to renew its work relief funding and financing scheme that had for two years made major urban work relief projects possible. Prime Minister R. B. Bennett believed that he had little choice but to abandon entirely the costly policy of federal support for
work relief schemes in favour of the cheaper direct relief. It was no mere policy shift. Rather, it was a complete reversal of the federal unemployment strategy. During his 1930 election campaign, Bennett had promised work for wages, the abolishment of the dole, and an end to unemployment. By 1932, unemployment levels were higher than ever, direct relief was Ottawa’s new approach to the unemployment problem, and the era of work for wages was over.

At the local level, cities simply could no longer afford to continue the policy on their own. This did not mean that cities were prepared to abandon work relief altogether, but in place of the major projects that had characterized work relief since the autumn of 1930, cities now employed jobless married men for small-scale, short-term work such as snow shovelling, street sweeping, and brush work. City engineers and planners organized this work as well, but never again would they be responsible for orchestrating massive undertakings using unemployment relief labour as they had during the early years of the Depression. City councils continued to ask them for advice on projects that might be proposed to the senior levels of government, but neither the provinces nor the federal government would sign work relief agreements of the sort they had approved under the two unemployment relief acts.

In the end, what cities like Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg were left with was a series of practical and useful infrastructure improvements that they would not have been able to afford on their own. And while the projects were never able to provide the cities’ jobless with steady work, they nevertheless offered urban residents work when there was none and wages that went some length toward feeding, housing, and clothing families.