



AXIS INSIGHTS

Why a Strong Infrastructure Business Case May Still Not Be Decision Ready

A business case gets finished. The numbers hold up under scrutiny. The need is real and well documented. Everyone on the project team believes they have answered the questions that were asked of them. Then the expected decision does not come. Sometimes what follows is silence. Sometimes it is a request that feels arbitrary, another round of analysis, another data request, without any explanation of what changed or what is actually still in question. The reaction inside the initiative is rarely anger at first. It is confusion. What else could they possibly want from us? We answered everything.

That confusion is the real subject of this piece, because it points to something proponents and their advisors often misdiagnose. The instinct is to treat “government approval” as a single decision that a strong enough case will eventually unlock. It is not one decision. It is a sequence of decisions, made by different institutions, each with its own mandate, its own evidence requirements, and its own definition of what a good answer looks like. A business case can be technically excellent and still not be decision ready, because decision readiness is not a property of the document. It is a property of the alignment among the proposal, the proponent and the institutions that have to act on it.

A document is not a decision

The gap between a strong case and a decision-ready one usually shows up in the same three places. First, the numbers can work on their own terms while still being fiscally unpalatable at the scale proposed. A campus or program that makes complete sense from a service planning perspective can still be too large a commitment for the fiscal envelope available in that period, and the honest answer is often a smaller, less ideal scope rather than a rejection of the need itself. Second, the case can be sound and still be poorly timed against the government’s priorities at that moment, for reasons that have nothing to do with the initiative’s merit. Third, and most often missed, the case can describe real outcomes without ever translating them into

something a political sponsor can use. Jobs created, wait times reduced, homes delivered and congestion eased are not add-ons to a good business case. They are often what allows a decision-maker to justify the investment publicly. A case that gets the service logic right but leaves this translation undone is asking a sponsor to spend political capital on their behalf without giving them anything to show for it.

Government is not one decision-maker

Every major infrastructure proposal moves through more than one institution, and each of them is answering a different question honestly, from its own mandate. A line ministry may be persuaded on service or health outcome grounds. A central agency is evaluating fiscal discipline and affordability. Elected decision-makers weigh visible, communicable results. None of these perspectives are wrong, and none of them are obstacles being difficult on purpose. They are legitimate, separate decision systems that were never designed to converge automatically, and the same underlying case has to be translated for each decision gate, not rebuilt into a separate submission for every institution.

The practical failure this produces is proponents aiming the wrong argument at the wrong audience at the wrong gate. A case built almost entirely on service need can stall at a fiscal gate not because the fiscal reviewers disagree with the need, but because nobody gave them the argument they were actually mandated to evaluate. Knowing which audience has to be satisfied at which point in the sequence, and building the case to speak to that audience specifically, matters more than the overall polish of the submission.

Where strong cases actually break down

Beyond the substance gaps above, there are structural patterns that have nothing to do with the quality of the analysis itself. The first is a quiet erosion of internal champions. When gaps in a case go unaddressed, the people inside government or inside the proponent's own organization who would otherwise advocate for it start to lose the confidence to fully back it, because they cannot defend what they cannot see clearly. Losing that advocate can stall an initiative even when the underlying need remains compelling.

The second is that formal feedback rarely captures the full institutional context surrounding a decision. A single well-prepared meeting will not reveal how mandates are shifting, what emerging priorities are competing for attention, or what unresolved concerns are quietly shaping a review. Understanding that context takes sustained engagement across the appropriate levels over time. It does not require privileged access, but it does require the discipline to remain present and informed as circumstances evolve.

The third is harder to hear but important to say plainly: sometimes an initiative does not move forward for reasons that have very little to do with the proponent at all. Priorities shift, and there is a pecking order on any given day that a proposal simply is not at the top of, regardless of how well it was built. Knowing the difference between a fixable gap and an honest question of timing is itself part of the work.

The same standstill can have very different causes

A hospital campus of care in a major urban centre had strong sponsor support and a credible funding share, but escalating construction costs meant the scope that made sense years earlier no longer fit the available fiscal envelope. The project sat unresolved for years until the direction became explicit: reduce scope meaningfully or it would not proceed. Even after that, the instinct was to preserve as much of the original scope as possible. What actually moved the needle was a structural idea, not a smaller ask: fit out a smaller initial scope while still constructing shell space sized for future expansion, lowering the immediate capital burden without foreclosing the long-term plan.

A long-term care redevelopment program faced the same affordability pressure for years, with a funding model that could never quite close the gap on its own. What ultimately created the conditions for rapid movement was not a better business case. It was the urgency created by a public health crisis that made the cost of inaction impossible to ignore. The lesson is not to wait for a crisis. It is that once a genuine window opens, whether through circumstance, political change or accumulated pressure, the proponent that has already done the readiness work is best positioned to act.

A transit-oriented development reached legal execution before the commercial and implementation mechanics, particularly how cost and risk would be shared, had been resolved in sufficient operating detail. By the time the gap surfaced, the project had stalled at the point where construction was expected to begin. The private partner interpreted government's concern primarily as protection of its financial position. A different diagnosis was that government needed visible fairness: an open-book arrangement that could demonstrate the reasonableness of the deal. That approach was never tested, so it cannot be presented as the solution. But the unresolved situation illustrates the larger point: when parties diagnose the constraint differently, negotiations can continue without addressing the issue actually preventing implementation.

What decision readiness actually requires

Across all of this, a workable framework holds up:

- A precisely defined decision
- A clear decision-maker and approval pathway
- Evidence matched to what that decision-maker is actually mandated to evaluate
- Explicit trade-offs rather than implied ones
- Scope, cost and funding that reconcile with each other
- Clear accountability inside the proponent's own organization
- A credible path to implementation once approved

This is a diagnostic lens, not a checklist to apply the same way every time. What an initiative has already done, how far it has progressed, and the relationships already in place around it all shape what readiness looks like for that specific case. There is no universal starting point.

The real value is an honest diagnosis

The path to approval is rarely a straight line, but it is not a mystery either. It can be mapped, gate by gate, audience by audience. When another round of analysis gets requested, the answer is not always more analysis. The first task is identifying which unresolved decision, dependency, or institutional requirement is actually holding things up.

That diagnosis has to be objective and it has to be honest, even when the honest answer is uncomfortable, including the possibility that timing and priority, not the proposal itself, are the real constraint. Champions cannot be protected from the decision environment, but they can be equipped for it: given a case they can credibly defend and a clear, truthful read of where things actually stand. That is often worth more than another polished draft of the business case. That is the discipline behind how Axis approaches a stalled initiative: not more analysis, but a clear-eyed read of what is actually blocking the decision.

Afshin Malekzadeh

Axis Infrastructure Advisory Partners