

ACCELERATING TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE TO SERVE ONE OF THE FASTEST GROWING REGIONAL ECONOMIES IN CANADA

ISSUE

Efficiently moving people and goods is essential for economic growth and for building a prosperous future for the province, its communities and its citizens. The economies of the Okanagan Valley and the southern Interior are inextricably linked to that of BC, Canada, and to our trading partners in the United States. However, the current transportation infrastructure connecting Washington State through to the TransCanada Highway in the interior of BC is not keeping pace with the population and economic growth of the region.

The Okanagan Valley is one of the fastest growing regions¹ not just in the province but in the entire country. A failure to address significant stress points along the valley corridor in a timely manner will limit that growth, minimize prosperity, create inter-community transportation challenges and consequently limit the region's contribution to the provincial economy.

Traffic in the region has grown along with the population and while individual mobility gets much of the attention from local governments, movement of goods, products and service vehicles gets very little attention. Given that transportation is a significant economic driver for BC and its efficiency impacts indirectly all other aspects of our economy, the establishment of a long-term integrated transportation strategy that considers business and industry needs is essential in ensuring BC's economic success.

BACKGROUND

According to the most recent census, British Columbia's population increased by 60% from 1986 to 2017 and the Central Okanagan has seen the largest regional population increase—114% since 1986.²

Population is projected to continue to grow rapidly through the Okanagan Valley, which will lead to further diversification of the economy through expansion in retail trade, construction, tourism and service industries. This growth is placing increasing traffic demands on Highway 97, Highway 97A and 97B.³

¹ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91-214-x/2018000/section01-eng.htm>

² Trends in BC Population Size & distribution – Ministry of Environment, BC Government
<http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/soe/indicators/sustainability/bc-population.html>

³ BC Ministry of Transportation Website – Okanagan Valley Corridor
<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/transportation/transportation-infrastructure/projects/okanagan-valley-corridor>

Significant provincial investment in transportation infrastructure improvements is needed to ensure the safe and efficient movement of people and goods, and reflect the objectives identified by communities as part of the 2011 Okanagan Valley Traffic Symposium.⁴

A recent Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure study⁵ of the Central Okanagan identified a number of concerns and noted that by 2040, the WR Bennett Bridge linking Kelowna to West Kelowna and spanning Okanagan Lake will reach capacity in its current configuration. The approaches on both sides will reach capacity before then. Counterflow lanes and pedestrian/bicycle lane removal are now being considered for retrofits to improve traffic flow. The study also noted that by 2040 all signalized intersections within developed areas in the study will experience significant congestion and delay.

Transportation improvements in the interior of British Columbia by both the Province and local governments over the past few decades have been positive but despite those improvements and because of the region's rapid growth, congestion and lack of infrastructure are creating significant challenges. As an example, the lack of a bypass or secondary routes around the urban centres; the continual risk of landslides along highway 97 and highway 97A connecting the central valley cities to the south and the US border; numerous other safety concerns; and congestion throughout the region all are threatening to hamper growth and constrain the economy. Notably, Highway 3 is a vital corridor for the transportation of both commercial goods and the traveling public between Vancouver and the Alberta border. At present, this route is one of the ten least safe roads in the province due to its narrow twists and turns. Realignment to improve the highway by widening and straightening will improve the flow of commerce and travel in southern British Columbia for the benefit of the entire province.⁶

Some studies and plans have been completed by various authorities. However, it has been some time since the Province fully engaged the business community and industrial stakeholders who rely heavily on the trucking industry to move more and more products to and from customers within, and throughout the region. Reduction in freight rail service over the last decade has also led to a dramatic increase in industrial traffic which has only added to the problem. This increased truck traffic, fueled primarily by diesel fuel, has led to a rise in GHG emissions which of course has a negative impact on the region's air quality, especially when traffic jams are factored in.

Unfortunately, responsibility for transportation is highly fractured; all levels of government retain some responsibility over the transportation system and as such all must recognize the absolute necessity of integrated long-term planning that addresses both the movement of people and products. This fragmented approach to planning may be one of the factors fueling the stalled discussions around a second crossing of Okanagan Lake and bypass

⁴ <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/transportation/transportation-infrastructure/projects/okanagan-valley-corridor/okanagan-symposium>

⁵ Okanagan Lake Second Crossing Project – Consultation Companion Report, Min. of Transportation, spring 2017. Summary of Key Findings

⁶ <https://globalnews.ca/news/1819213/british-columbias-12-deadliest-highways/>

routes around major metropolitan areas. Regardless of the causes of the delayed discussions, those in the trucking industry and commuters themselves are increasingly concerned and frustrated by the clogging of the transportation arteries that are the lifeblood of the economy.

It is also important to note that numerous surveys conducted by various Chambers in the interior have flagged transportation as the number one issue for businesses and industry. The Mayor of Kelowna said in a public speech in April of 2019 that transportation is the “number one most important issue raised by residents of Kelowna, year over year.”

THE CHAMBER RECOMMENDS

That the Provincial Government:

1. Establish a long-term vision for the Okanagan’s transportation network that builds on the vision of the “Cariboo Connector” and commits to a multi-lane highway that spans the entire region.
2. Re-engage the business community and industry leaders in the Okanagan in identifying and implementing strategic regional investments in the transportation network including but not limited to accelerating the planning and implementation of:
 - a. The second crossing of Okanagan Lake to better serve the rapidly growing cities of Kelowna and West Kelowna.
 - b. Highway bypass routes near Peachland, Kelowna, and Vernon.
 - c. Grade separated interchanges along highway 97 near high population areas that accommodate higher vehicular capacity and reduce the negative impacts of stop and go industrial traffic at controlled intersections.
 - d. Realign Hwy 3 to improve the highway by widening and straightening to improve the flow of commerce and travel in southern British Columbia for the benefit of the entire province.
3. Initiate a discussion with regional local government leaders, along with industry and business leaders in evaluating the potential of creating a regional governance model to plan, implement, and operate a regional transportation system.
4. Engage in discussions with transportation authorities in Washington State in identifying opportunities to enhance the inland transportation corridor for business and industrial traffic.
5. Work with the Federal Government to enhance the capacity and operation of the US border crossings in the interior of BC as a means of strengthening economic activity and providing a viable alternative to ever-increasing traffic gridlock along the US I-5 corridor.

Submitted by the Kelowna Chamber of Commerce; supported by the Greater Vernon Chamber of Commerce, the Greater Westside Board of Trade, the Peachland Chamber of Commerce, the Summerland Chamber of Commerce and the Penticton & Wine Country Chamber of Commerce.