

A Long Term Strategic Approach to Transportation in the Southern Interior of British Columbia

The need for transportation infrastructure that encourages and supports economic growth is a fundamental element of a prosperous economy. However, the infrastructure that exists in many parts of the province does not support economic growth and in many areas results in a deterrent to the prosperity of the surrounding communities.

Nowhere is this more evident than in one of the fastest growing regions of the province – the Southern Interior of British Columbia. The Southern Interior of British Columbia roughly falls south of the Thompson River and Shuswap Country (corresponding mostly to the post-Oregon Treaty remainder of the old, original, Hudson's Bay Company Columbia District). When used directly, it generally means the Okanagan and adjoining areas, particularly the Similkameen, southern Monashees and Boundary Country.

With a growing and diverse economy, the region holds particular importance for the province as a considerable engine of growth. From manufacturing, agriculture, construction, education, tourism, high-tech as well as strong commercial and institutional development, the economic strength of the region has driven significant in-migration, both from other provinces and from abroad. This growth has had a profound effect on the region and on the transportation infrastructure that needs a continuing long term strategy.

As with any region in a province as vast and geographically distinct as BC, the viability of the local and regional economy is directly linked with the transportation network which serves it. This network includes provincial highways, local roads, transit service, cycling and pedestrian corridors.

This network is not only critical to the larger urban centres in the region but is also important to the small communities and the rural areas that are an integral part of the social, environmental and economic fabric of the province.

The Chamber believes that along with the “traditional” highway corridor expansion projects, opportunities for innovative projects and initiatives exist, such as public transit and other initiatives directly and indirectly related to transportation issues, which are critical to the future economic success of the province.

In addition to the economic challenges the transportation network brings, there are also significant safety issues relating to narrow and often meandering roadways from high mountain passes to indirect routes around water bodies.

In recognition of these challenges, in 2004 Western Economic Diversification Canada partnered with the three regional districts in the Okanagan and Similkameen Valleys to produce the report, “Okanagan Valley Transportation Corridor – An Assessment of Select Projects and Initiatives.”

This report delivered a comprehensive prioritized list of transportation infrastructure projects, focused on the corridors between Osoyoos and Enderby and along the corridor between Osoyoos and Princeton (in essence, Highway 97 and Highway 3).

The Chamber welcomed the recommendations of the report which focus on highway expansion and enhancement projects as well as public transit options. The Okanagan Transportation Panel also welcomed the efforts made by the report's authors to prioritize the projects using a benefit-cost analysis to balance the benefits which a project produces against the costs of producing that benefit.

The Chamber has notes the significant improvements to the highway 97 corridor by the provincial Government since 2007. While The Chamber welcomes this initiative, it should be noted that these projects do not fully deliver on all of the important on the improvements required.

It is recognized that the footprint of the 2004 study does not address the entire region. As such a new report should be commissioned that includes the 2004 report as a base of information noting improvements that have been made since that time in order to establish a long-term strategic vision for transportation in the Southern Interior of British Columbia.

THE CHAMBER RECOMMENDS:

That the Provincial Government

review and take immediate action to update the "Okanagan Valley Transportation Corridor – An Assessment of Select Projects and Initiatives" report;

create an integrated, multi-modal transportation vision for the Southern Interior region that builds on the "Okanagan Valley Transportation Corridor – An Assessment of Select Projects and Initiatives" report; and

work with municipalities and regional districts to include the tributary highways of the Southern Interior of British Columbia