

DRIVING B.C.'S ECONOMY: IMPROVING HIGHWAY INFRASTRUCTURE IN NORTHERN B.C. (2023)

2023

Transportation & Infrastructure

Issue

The rural and remote communities of Northern B.C. are at the heart of the provincial economy, providing resources and revenues that benefit all British Columbians. Much of the transportation supporting the Northern economy relies on dangerous and inefficient two-lane highway and road systems without proper rest stops for long haul drivers. With the economy of Northeastern B.C. growing rapidly, traffic on these highways is increasing, leading to more wear and tear on the roads, more risks and more delays for B.C. businesses. We recommend that the provincial government invest in four-laning highways across B.C.'s North, with attention to Highway 97 between Dawson Creek and Fort St. John. As part of this section of highway, we recommend the replacement of Taylor Bridge, which connects the north to the south across the Peace River.

The impact of highway closures to our supply chain in August of 2022 was apparent when the highway was closed due to a serious accident on a bridge on the Alaska Highway. The resulting detour forced trucks with industrial equipment, groceries, fuel, mail and other essential supplies to another route that added days to deliveries. The impact to several communities, including Indigenous communities, was significant and dangerous. Timelines on this project continue to be delayed which only increases risk to industry, economic growth and a safe travelling experience for all who use our highways in the north. A recent article published by BC Business states the following "Work is plentiful in several sectors. In 2019, \$8.9 billion in energy exports were produced in the northeast. The Peace River Region is home to 20,000 drilled wells, including some in North America's largest gas fields. Ninety percent of B.C.'s grain production occurs there, along with 38% of B.C.'s hydroelectric power. Every year, the Peace River Region sees 300,000 tourists." [\[1\]](#)

Background

The Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure 2022/2023-2024/2025 Service Plan states is "Performance Planning Goal 1: Invest in rural and urban infrastructure improvements that help build a strong, sustainable economy.

Objective 1.1: Use Provincial investment dollars effectively to complete priority projects on budget and on time Key Strategies:

1. Lead infrastructure planning needs of rural and urban B.C., in partnership with other Provincial ministries to support local government's priority infrastructure projects.

2. Develop strategic partnerships with federal and other local government agencies, communities and the private sector to invest in priority rehabilitation and improvement projects, including flood recovery efforts, that serve the best interest of British Columbians.
3. Streamline consultation, tendering and construction of infrastructure projects to ensure projects are delivered without unnecessary delays.
4. Lead negotiations for the next round of federal-provincial infrastructure programs.
5. Use innovative solutions and best practices to deliver the most cost-effective transportation investment plans” [2]

B.C.’s Budget 2022, capital spending on schools, hospitals, roads, bridges, hydro-electric projects and other infrastructure around the province is expected to total \$39.4 billion over the three-year fiscal plan period. These investments will help ensure that the necessary infrastructure is in place to deliver the services that people count on in communities around the province and create jobs that support a strong and sustainable economy. [3] The Stronger Together report went on to state “Budget 2022 is making strong investments to ensure people across B.C. are poised to benefit from sustainable economic and resource development today and into the future” [4] A report from the Conference Board of Canada shows the potential for further development in Northeastern B.C. as the LNG and subsidiary industries continue to develop. [5] The total value of major projects proposed and begun in Northeastern B.C. has tripled in the last decade. [6] This growth trend can only be expected to continue as the LNG industry develops and LNG Canada enters into planning for phase 2 of their project. This continued economic growth will bring more and heavier vehicles that wear down highways faster and create additional risk for those who travel northern routes daily.

ICBA has created a “#Get2Yes” campaign stating “The Taylor Bridge was built in 1960 and is 721 metres long, spanning the Peace River on Highway 97 between Dawson Creek and Fort St. John, near the community of Taylor. Current traffic volume on Highway 97 between Dawson Creek and Fort St. John is approximately 7,500 vehicles per day, 30 percent of which is commercial vehicle traffic.

This bridge is now in disrepair. Past inspection reports have outlined some of the bridge’s major problems: Steel grid deck and catwalk deterioration. Localized corrosion issues. High/increasing maintenance costs and traffic delays for deck repairs. Major route. Long detours.”

In May 2019, officials with the B.C. Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure announced that they were in the preliminary stages of examining three options for fixing or replacing the Taylor Bridge. Despite this report, no money has been allocated to Taylor Bridge through at least 2024.

The Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services REPORT ON THE BUDGET 2020 CONSULTATION stated “According to the Tourism Industry Association of B.C., tourism contributes \$9 billion to the provincial GDP and is the third largest industry in the province. They discussed the importance of supporting ongoing activities as well as new destination opportunities, highlighting the potential for tourism to support and

transition resource-based communities.” [7] The need to offer safe travel corridors vastly increases the opportunity to welcome tourist related travellers to the north.

Further to the Committee’s feedback on Tourism, the following was highlighted: “With respect to tourism, Committee Members appreciated ideas to expand products and experiences and to explore new markets, including potential opportunities for economic development in rural communities. They especially focused on inclusion and accessible tourism as a key area to pursue.” [8]

These roads are relied upon by the oil & gas, forestry industries, tourism from the US to Alaska, for workers who travel between communities and drive daily and currently, for construction of the Site C dam just outside Fort St. John. For many trips, there is only one possible route—a two-lane road in poor condition. [9] This is a problem for the following reasons:

1. No Rail. While rail is commonly used in Southern B.C. to transport freight and support industry, there is less rail infrastructure in the North, pushing all freight transportation onto highways. [10]
2. Delays. A road in poor condition needs frequent maintenance and occasionally more serious construction work, which means alternating traffic through one lane while work occurs on the other side. Many Northern roads have insufficient shoulders and bottlenecking also occurs when a rig breaks down and is unable to pull out of the lane. These types of bottlenecks can also become safety hazards as cars attempt to maneuver around. [11]
3. Safety. On two-lane roads with many large, slower-moving trucks and few opportunities to pass safely, there is a unique risk for head-on accidents, as drivers may make dangerous passing choices. The issues of safety on the highway and efficient traffic flow compound one another. [12]

To address these issues, work is needed to improve the following infrastructure:

1. Highway 97 from Dawson Creek to Fort St. John. This is the corridor through which millions of dollars' worth of goods flow back and forth between businesses in the north and south of northern B.C., as well as Alberta, the Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Alaska. A previous provincial government mandate to four-lane this route was never completed and there are still many two-lane sections, with many of the associated safety and efficiency issues described above.
2. Taylor Bridge. This section of highway also includes the two-lane Taylor Bridge, which crosses the Peace River, connecting the north and south of Northeast B.C. This vital artery in the transportation network is located just outside of Fort St. John and is busy with commercial traffic serving all LNG production and other resource industry facilities. A 2015 inspection found that the bridge’s deterioration required \$1 million in repairs each year (expected to increase), causing long delays during short seasonal construction timeframes and gave the bridge an urgency rating for replacement of 4 out of 5, which indicates “the dire economic issues that would arise should the span be closed.” [13]

3. Taylor Hill. The hills on either side of the Taylor Bridge are prone to landslides and further drainage capacity is needed to mitigate this risk.^[14] A major landslide in this area is not only a risk to public safety, but also has the potential to cut off highway access to Fort St. John from the South for an extended period of time, causing extreme disruptions to the B.C. economy. Work has been done on four-laning and reducing risks on Taylor Hill, but the project has not been completed.^[15]

This policy resolution is expected to receive broad support from Northern communities and businesses that rely on the highway for access, including elected officials, the Resource Municipalities Coalition,^[16] ^[17] and industry associations. This recommendation builds on proposals made to the provincial government in the past by the North Peace Rural Roads Initiative, the BC Trucking Association, the Independent Contractors and Businesses Association of B.C. and the Business Council of B.C.^[18] Additionally, this resolution aligns with recommendations of the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services for the B.C. Budget 2022 Consultation.

The B.C. Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure is currently putting together a business case for either replacing or renovating Taylor Bridge and it is likely that the option to replace will be superior. Cost estimates for the project are not yet publicly available, but a typical estimate for a four-lane bridge is about \$250 million, plus at least \$70M to complete the risk mitigation on Taylor Hill and the four-laning of the highway from Dawson Creek to Fort St. John.^[19] It is hoped that between the revenues generated for the provincial government by the Northeastern economy— including an expected \$23 billion from LNG production in Fort St. John— and the provincial government's commitment to infrastructure spending in the coming years, that this project can be prioritized for funding.^[20]

In May of 2022, Minister Fleming stated "I'm very excited about the Taylor Bridge. It's been looked at many times by previous governments and the engagement we've had with the community working group we have on the bridge is informing some decisions we're going to make going forward. And they're going to be very expensive." Fleming said he believes the bridge is a "very strong candidate" for a federal partnership. It's greatly important as a trading corridor and as an inter-provincial connection with the oil and gas sector in Alberta and British Columbia, in addition to being crucially important for people who live, work and play in communities that rely on that bridge," he said. "I think we've got them in agreement on the need to invest in trading corridors. We want to make a very strong economic case for that. It's going to help our case to have passionate and if need be, louder voices from the region to be with us to successfully get a federal investment."^[21]

THE CHAMBER RECOMMENDS

That the Provincial Government:

1. Move forward with a four-lane Highway 97 from Dawson Creek to Fort St. John.
2. Replace the old two-lane Taylor Bridge outside Fort St. John with a new four-lane bridge:

- Complete the four-laning of the highway and installation of drainage to prevent landslides on the hills on either side of Taylor Bridge.
3. Direct funding to indigenous communities to participate in consultations and engagement on the projects.
 4. Explore further opportunities to streamline the provincial economy by improving highway and road infrastructure in Northern B.C.

[1] https://www.BCbusiness.ca/Fort-St-John-is-Powering-Possibility?fBClid=IwAR105Zwjkp3D3P7UL7-tzXQLU4B1OI4d2TsGsrB9aV_ZGtl3htqmyoaE-ww

[2] <https://www.BCbudget.gov.BC.ca/2022/sp/pdf/ministry/tran.pdf>

[3] https://www.BCbudget.gov.BC.ca/2022/pdf/2022_budget_and_fiscal_plan.pdf

[4] https://www.BCbudget.gov.BC.ca/2022/pdf/2022_Highlights.pdf

[5] Robins, Allison, Prince Owusu, Dan Munro, and Len Coad. A Changing Tide: British Columbia's Emerging LNG Industry. Ottawa: The Conference Board of Canada, 2016. <https://www.conferenceboard.ca/e-library/abstract.aspx?did=7726>

[6] Resource Municipalities Coalition. "Submission to Select Standing Committee on Financial and Government Services." <http://rmcoalition.com/reports/coalition-position-papers-and-letters/>; British Columbia. "B.C. Major Projects Inventory; Recent Reports." <https://www2.gov.BC.ca/gov/content/employment-business/economic-development/industry/BC-major-projects-inventory/recent-reports>

[7] https://www.leg.BC.ca/content/CommitteeDocuments/41st-parliament/4th-session/fgs/reports/FGS_41-2-2_Budget-2020-Consultation-Report_2019-08-07.pdf

[8] https://www.leg.BC.ca/content/CommitteeDocuments/41st-parliament/4th-session/fgs/reports/FGS_41-2-2_Budget-2020-Consultation-Report_2019-08-07.pdf

[9] Report on the Budget 2019 Consultation. Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services.

[10] Railway Association of Canada. Canadian Railway Atlas, 5th edition. <https://www.proximityissues.ca/reference/maps/>

[11] Report on the Budget 2019 Consultation. Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services.

[12] Report on the Budget 2019 Consultation. Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services.

[13] <https://www.alaskahighwaynews.ca/opinion/dan-davies-build-the-bridge-3510022>

[14] BGC Engineering. "Alaska Highway Upgrade." https://www.bgcengineering.ca/alaska_highway_upgrade.html

[15] British Columbia. "Highway 97 – South Taylor Hill." <https://www2.gov.BC.ca/gov/content/transportation/transportation-infrastructure/projects/south-taylor-hill>

[16] Personal correspondence.

[17] Personal correspondence; Resource Municipalities Coalition. "Submission to Select Standing Committee on Financial and Government Services." <http://rmcoalition.com/reports/coalition-position-papers-and-letters/>

[18] Report on the Budget 2019 Consultation. Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services

[19] Personal correspondence.

[20] British Columbia. Making Life Better: Budget 2019. <https://www.BCbudget.gov.BC.ca/2019/download.htm>

[21] <https://www.alaskahighwaynews.ca/regional-news/taylor/going-to-be-very-expensive-minister-says-about-new-taylor-bridge-5335956>