



A Systems Approach for Provincial Transportation Systems

Issue

That transportation systems are intrinsically linked to economic development is a self-evident truth. However, there is a growing trend in the transportation planning literature, and in the developed plans of both national and provincial organizations, to consider best-practice for this discipline in terms of multimodal transportation planning. A cost-effective and efficient transportation network in Alberta requires a systematic planning approach collaboratively directed by a provincial body. Specifically, it requires all key public and private sector organizations in the province to work together in coordinating a holistic transportation system where long-term development objectives that provide an equitable, cost-effective, and reliable means of moving people and goods are examined.

Background

Transportation has long been recognized as playing a critical role in the overall prosperity of a society. It is one of the systems that virtually all Albertans utilize and depend on daily. In a very competitive and integrated world economy, most businesses require access to efficient and cost-effective transportation services to export their merchandise to the market or to access imported goods. More than 2,000 Alberta businesses export goods and services around the world, which means most of Alberta's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is dependent on international trade in one fashion or another. Thus, remaining competitive in international markets is essential for maintaining and enhancing the standard of living in Alberta, particularly as our province attempts to diversify our economic base and move away from our long dependence on crude oil exports.¹

The opportunities are there. Almost every expert predicts that there are significant opportunities for Canada to increase agri-food exports in response to a growing global demand for high-quality food products, and Alberta is well-positioned agriculturally and industrially for rapid expansion to meet this demand. However, unless significant changes are made, the transportation system in Alberta could be ineffective in meeting the needs of citizens, communities, and businesses to take advantage of this growth. Inefficient transportation means a reduction in competitiveness, and there is a real possibility of our region being sidelined while economic development progresses in more accessible locations with lower transportation costs. The cost of not proactively improving our transportation system could be very high.

¹ Source: <http://www.transportation.alberta.ca/Content/docType56/Production/AEDA2004.pdf>

In Western Canada, roughly “40 to 45 percent of the unfunded infrastructure needs are in transportation—roads, bridges, interchanges, traffic control devices and public transit.”² Most of these transportation projects fall under provincial and municipal jurisdiction. Municipal jurisdictions on their own have limited resources: they are expected to meet the unique infrastructure demands of their constituency through a system of competition for limited infrastructure funds between transportation and other municipal projects.³ If the province were to pursue a combined, multimodal approach to transportation planning, whereby all the relevant stakeholders, modes of transport, and resources are included, it may be possible to alleviate the financial burden faced by individual jurisdictions through the increased efficiency of a centralized, collaborative process.

The Government of Alberta recognizes that a good transportation system is vital to the prosperity of Alberta;⁴ however, the province also recognizes that a cost-effective means of improving transportation networks cannot be efficaciously accomplished through project-based planning approaches, since singular projects tend to be an inefficient means of addressing the larger goal of fostering economic growth. Both the province and the federal government have enshrined this thinking into their strategic plans, and consequently all stakeholders can expect the Provincial and Federal governments to favor proposals that take a systems-view of transportation projects and which respond to productivity objectives, consider cross-impacts on land use, urban and community development, and the environment, and demonstrate the capacity to coordinate the disparate goals of individual communities.

In summation, an efficient provincial transportation system, based on multimodal transportation planning, could improve competitive access to global markets, link communities and enable economic growth. A partnership between representatives of public and private sector organizations in the province would pave the way for addressing shared challenges and opportunities while working collaboratively to transform the existing transportation system to foster tangible economic and social benefits.⁵

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends the Government of Alberta:

1. Adopt a multimodal systems planning approach for a cost-effective and efficient means of transportation in Alberta.
2. Encourage the establishment of collaborative regional organizations to conduct regional transportation planning for the inclusion of a provincial plan and explore appropriate funding models to support this initiative.
3. Plan and select transportation projects with greater emphasis on their potential economic impacts and their fit within a network that lowers the cost and improves the efficiency of supply chains.

² Western Canada Transportation Infrastructure Strategy for an Economic Network: A time for vision and leadership. (March, 2005). Retrieved from <http://www.transportation.alberta.ca/Content/docType56/Production/WTM-Strategy.pdf>

³ Western Canada Transportation Infrastructure Strategy for an Economic Network: A time for vision and leadership. (March, 2005). Retrieved from <http://www.transportation.alberta.ca/Content/docType56/Production/WTM-Strategy.pdf>

⁴ Business Plan 2016-2019 Transportation. (March 17, 2016). Retrieved From <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/9d234882-5822-4e06-8e08-b00faa488647/resource/6b517f10-2c7b-45a1-b6f1-b088e78b09cd/download/transportation-2016-19.pdf>

⁵ Dixon, E. (2017). Access to Markets: Commercial Transportation Issues in Southern Alberta. Retrieved from [file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/Transportation%20Issues%20Final%20Report%20Sept%202014%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/Transportation%20Issues%20Final%20Report%20Sept%202014%20(1).pdf)