

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.

The Government of Alberta recognizes that a good transportation system is vital to the prosperity of Alberta, as is evidenced by the long-term multi-modal transportation strategy that has been in place since 2016. However, the province also recognizes that a cost-effective means of improving transportation 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

¹ The Van Horne Institute. (2004) The Transportation Sector in Alberta: Present Position and Future Outlook. Retrieved from <http://www.transportation.alberta.ca/Content/docType56/Production/AEDA2004.pdf>

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.

While Provincial and Federal governments have made significant investments towards transportation, including developing an increasingly integrated system of traditional rail, subway, light-rail transit, and buses. However, the small and medium sized municipalities continue to lack adequate transportation infrastructure and often wait years for strategic projections to be approved or funded. This reality puts these communities at a disadvantage when it comes to attracting and retaining industry, talent, and investments, as well as limits the everyday mobility of residents.

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.²

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends the Government of Alberta:

1. Work with the federal government to ensure the specific needs of transportation are economically significant and merit a proportional share of investment;
2. Work together with other levels of government to improve transportation and mobility throughout the province. Opportunities for collaboration beyond funding partnerships should be explored;
3. Plan and select transportation projects to promote an awareness of the importance of transportation and transportation choices to the economy, the environment and social lives of Albertans and Canadians;
4. Commit to an integrated and multi-modal approach to transportation infrastructure policy and planning; and
5. Create a policy and regulatory environment that incentivizes technological advances in the transportation sector.

² 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)