



INFRASTRUCTURE SPENDING IN BC – WHAT ABOUT THE NORTH?

If you travel north from the scenic resource town of Fort St. James, you will find yourself on what most provincial maps label as the Germansen Road. The locals call it, the North Road. Anyone who travels the 105 kilometres of the North Road will find it to be a bumpy, dusty and not well-maintained gravel road. Traffic encountered along the way includes logging trucks, mining trucks, low-beds, delivery trucks, school buses, postal vehicles, crew buses and personal vehicles owned by the many resource workers, First Nations, local landowners and hunters who travel it daily.

The North Road is a multi-use public road with a history that dates back to the Omineca Gold Rush of the 1860's. At that time, the North Road was merely a wagon trail constructed northward from the community of Fort St. James, across the Nation River and over Baldy Mountain, to access the gold panning communities of Manson Creek and Germansen Landing. With the increase in placer mining in the area and the expectation of another gold rush, the provincial government upgraded the trail

to a more drivable standard and in 1927, the North Road came under the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure's (MOTI) administration.

A significant concern facing northern BC logging and trucking contractors is the noticeable lack of spending on infrastructure and general maintenance along some of the northern main access corridors. Few concerns are as significant as the lack of maintenance and general safety issues surrounding travel along the North Road, a road that supplies timber to five sawmills and a bioenergy plant in Fort St. James and Vanderhoof and links these communities to the mines at Mount Milligan and Kemess.

The North Road is atypical as it sees considerable use by both the forest industry and mining. What is atypical is that similar MOTI administered resource access roads in the Quesnel district to the south do not suffer such poor maintenance funding allocations. Appeals from forestry contractors and the community at large for increased maintenance along the North Road appear to fall on deaf ears.

An estimated 750,000 cubic metres of coniferous log volume was hauled down the North Road to Fort St. James in 2017, which equates to more than 70 logging truck loads each day with peaks of more than 150. Crew buses travel about 80 kilometres to and from Mount Milligan Mine and Fort St. James at the beginning and end of each shift. Residents from Manson Creek, Germansen Landing, and many other communities and homesteads north of Fort St. James use the North Road as their main transportation route. Additionally, with the construction of the Community Connector Forest Service Road, that links the towns of Fort St. James and Mackenzie, and the Hat Lake Connector that joins the busy Leo Creek Road with the North Road, the amount of traffic along the North Road has never been higher. Adding to the fact that the road has a gravel surface, can be dangerously dusty in the dry season, is narrow and windy along much of the route, and is not radio-assisted, safety is a major concern. To many who use it on a regular basis, the



North Road is another fatality accident waiting to happen.

In a recent letter from the MOTI, they stated, “the Ministry has invested in excess of \$7 million in the Germansen Landing Road over the past number of years.” However, users know that it was mostly for the upgrade of a large bridge structure on the Nation River crossing. Most would suggest that \$7 million is not a lot when considering the level of use, length and type of vehicular travel this road sees. Along with regular maintenance activities associated with perhaps the MOTI’s lowest road classification, this spending seems trivial compared to the amount and value of timber that gets hauled along it each year.

At a TLA member meeting held recently in Prince George, the Honourable Doug Donaldson, Minister of Forest Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development was provided some insight into the state of the roads in the north and the problems that many local contractors face as a result of the general lack of road infrastructure spending specifically on the North Road.

Ben Hoy of the KDL Group in Fort St. James and TLA member questioned the government’s lack of initiative to provide adequate maintenance on highly used roads that see upwards of “\$1 million worth of timber hauled along them on a daily basis.” Hoy pointed out that there are no incentives in place to motivate any of the industrial road users to provide the maintenance required to ensure a high standard of road condition. He went on to say that current government systems “pit industrial users against each other” instead of establishing a system that would promote “the highest standard of road safety for our people”. These words are echoed throughout the industry by logging contractors and truck drivers who must negotiate northern road networks each day along conditions that are often substandard.

Major forest tenure holders in the area have proposed that the MOTI relinquish administrative rights of the North Road to the Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development (FLNRO). This would in turn reclassify the road as a Forest Service Road (FSR), which would be radio-assisted and allow industrial traffic to better communicate with each other,



Photo: Connor Schuetz

including warning each other about oncoming non-industrial traffic.

However, a petition has been organized by residents in Fort St. James asking for a halt to the North Road becoming a FSR. Their concern about the conversion is the potential for increased load limits, thus allowing larger trucks with larger loads, at the expense of a greater hazard to the public and greater negative impact on road conditions. Also at the time of writing there are 1,775 names on this petition, a number closely comparable to the population of the town itself. At the time of writing, the public consultation process about this proposed change is still on-going.

As a FSR, some safety standards may improve in the short-term, or as long as the road is being utilized for forestry activities. However, considering the number of different types of road users and the importance to local rural communities, the North Road may be better suited to remain under the jurisdiction of the MOTI with a supporting increase in infrastructure and maintenance spending. Whether this is accomplished through a provincial infrastructure grant or a road reclassification that will direct more annual maintenance funds toward it, it is up to the Government of BC to realize that the inadequate amount of spending that has been allocated to this road over the years has inspired more than a little bit of concern over driver and passenger safety.

In April 2018, the Canadian government pledged BC more than \$4 billion in federal funds to be directed toward in-

frastructure. However, the vast majority of this money will never leave the lower mainland. According to the MOTI website, there are only 74 of 618 infrastructure projects happening in BC north of Highway 16. That is a very small percentage considering the amount of money that the provincial government receives each year from northern resource development. Conducting major upgrades to the North Road and following it up with a meaningful annual maintenance program would be a good investment towards future development in the north. It would provide a safer travel route for industrial road users, the communities north of Fort St. James, as well as for logging and trucking contractors who are the backbone of these communities.

The North Road is a prominent example of a broader issue of what some view as taking for granted of the province’s rural areas that generate a disproportionate amount of economic activity. A review of the state of resource roads that provide economic activity and linkages to remote communities would be a good investment in supporting our resource activity and the remote communities that rely on them.▲

Paul Schuetz has spent more than 20 years working in the Northern Interior forests with Industrial Forestry Service Ltd. His experience in timber cruising, road engineering and crew management give him unique insights into contractor issues in the north. If you have an issue you want to bring to the TLA, call Paul at 250-564-4115.