

IN A TAILSPIN

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If there's one thing that binds us as Islanders, it's our perpetual unhappiness with ferry fares. But getting here is only one piece of the transportation puzzle. Once on-Island, there's a confusing mix of transit authorities, airports and notorious bottlenecks like the Malahat and the Colwood crawl, not to mention the beautiful but sometimes heart-stopping drive across the Island on Highway 4 to Tofino.

Transportation infrastructure doesn't exactly set the dinner discussion ablaze and it's definitely not a first-date topic, but transportation issues will impact the cost of that entrée and bottle of merlot you order on that first-date dinner.

Issues surrounding transportation also impact the viability of tourism, the ability to attract business investment and the overall quality of life, be it a dedicated bike lane that goes past your favourite coffee shop or a much-needed passing lane on a dangerous stretch of highway.

Last fall, the B.C. Government, as part of the *BC On The Move* transportation planning process, launched an online survey and a series of stakeholder meetings across the Island.

However, many observers believe that, at 10 years, the government's planning horizon is too soon to address our economic opportunities and future population growth. Many stakeholders feel the process was rushed to fit political timelines, not real-world ones, and is too focused on project-by-project prioritizing and less on big-picture planning.

But it's also vital to note that the public purse is limited and the Island presents some interesting challenges from a transportation-planning perspective. At more than 780,000 inhabitants and with a projected annual growth rate of .8 per cent, Vancouver Island is the largest ferry-dependent population in North America, as noted by Vision Victoria blogger Bernard von Schulmann.

Seventy-five per cent of that population is

concentrated on the east side of the Island, south of Comox Valley to the Capital Regional District. A matrix of governments and agencies are responsible for various aspects of transportation, few of them coordinated, some of them working at odds with one another. For example, the B.C. Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure is in charge of highways while municipalities pave, patch and repair roads within their boundaries. Industry maintains forest roads, some of them used as de facto public highways, under the auspices of the Forest Land and Natural Resource Operations ministry. There are eight independent transit systems on the Island from Port Hardy to Saanich, leaving some communities such as Ladysmith on heavy commuter routes without any transit at all.

On the maritime side of the transportation spectrum, BC Ferries, Black Ball Ferry Line and Washington State Ferries service the Island, along with smaller private operations like the MV Uchuck that delivers goods and tourists to remote communities such as Zeballos and Friendly Cove on Nootka Island. Climbing skyward, seven airports compete for Vancouver Island inbound and outbound airline passengers.

COMPLEXITY REIGNS

From an overall planning perspective, it's a dog's breakfast. Bruce Carter, CEO of the Greater Victoria Chamber of Commerce, considers it a doubled-edged transportation challenge: first people and freight need to get to and from the Island, and second it has to move around once customers have shelled out for ever-increasing ferry fares or airline tickets. If he could get the ear of B.C. Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure Todd Stone for 10 minutes, Carter would offer the minister a laundry list of immediate needs.

For starters, Carter would demand a break on ferry rates. (As far back as 2008, Island truckers were feeling the squeeze from the double whammy of high fuel costs and one-way ferry trips costing around \$400.)

Next, Carter would move on to upgrades for the shoddy Coho Ferry Terminal on Belleville

Street. Also on his list is an extension of bus-only lanes all the way to the Western Communities to alleviate "Colwood Crawl" congestion and boost transit ridership.

As for rail, which is an emotional topic on the Island, Carter sees a future for it but only as a freight service north of Duncan. With an estimated \$100-million in upgrades required for the Esquimalt and Nanaimo line, including the Courtenay to Victoria line and the Port Alberni extension, not to mention another \$30 million for VIA stations and trains and a potential \$84 million for bridge improvements, Carter doesn't believe passenger ridership would be adequate to support such a massive investment.

Given this diversity of transportation issues, he questions whether *BC On The Move* has the necessary depth and timeline. "We really need an Island-wide transportation strategy to coordinate and connect communities," Carter says. "I'm hopeful for the provincial plan but it really seems like something that was timed for political reasons more than anything else."

MOVING ON UP THE ISLAND

Head up-Island and the transportation question becomes increasingly diverse and complex, and you still can't avoid the touchy issue of ferries.

On November 4, 2014, a leaked report by the Independent Ferries Commissioner included a suggestion that closing the Departure Bay terminal and shifting all mid-Island to Mainland ferry traffic to underutilized Duke Point would be a way for the corporation to save money. The public furor was immediate and vociferous.

The day after the report leaked, Minister Stone moved quickly to quash the politically fatal Departure Bay closure option. The citizen's website FerryHostage.com captures the general public antipathy towards the ferry corporation.

But George Hanson, president of the Vancouver Island Economic Alliance, believes a myopic focus on ferries unfairly overshadows other pressing transportation issues that he hears from business owners and VIEA members, such as transit connectivity between communities,

links between ground transportation providers and the various regional airports, and the sorry state of Island roads and highways. The public comment period for *BC On The Move* closed December 12, 2014 and Hanson was one of more than 12,000 British Columbians who completed an online survey.

"There's no shortage of transportation wish lists. A planning process that focuses too much on incremental improvements is reactive," Hanson says. "We need a deeper conversation about where the Island is going and growing — and that doesn't happen in an online survey."

That's why VIEA has been working on a parallel process with stakeholders to develop an Island-wide transportation plan with a 30-to-60-year horizon, says Hanson. [Ed. Note: VIEA also partnered with the Victoria Chamber of Commerce, Chemistry Consulting and Douglas magazine to host the first Vancouver Island Transportation Forum on March 31 to encourage dialogue around transportation.]

ACCOMMODATING INDUSTRY

An hour west of Nanaimo, over the hump on the notoriously windy Highway 4, Port Alberni has big plans for a deep-sea port and container facility on Huu-ay-aht First Nation traditional territory 30 km south of Port Alberni, with three deep-sea berths and 17 acres of storage assembly area. In theory, this \$1.7 billion port would accept incoming container ships from Asia, capitalizing on a location several hours' sailing time closer to Asian markets than Port Metro Vancouver, where containers would be resorted and shipped off to ports in the lower Mainland and Puget Sound region.

"Six thousand ships pass by the mouth of our inlet very year. We see our position on the West Coast as a great advantage and we hope to attract a portion of container traffic that would otherwise go to the lower Mainland," says Zoran Knezevic, president and CEO of the Port Alberni Port Authority, describing the rationale behind PATH, the Port Alberni Trans-shipment Hub project. "It's a large project and we're looking at realistically six to seven years before it's

completed."

However, for PATH to set sail, Port Alberni is reliant on major transportation decisions made in Victoria. Though a rail line already connects Port Alberni to the east coast of Vancouver Island, Knezevic says truck transport, because of its relative flexibility and the short haul distances, will be an essential component of the plan.

"Port Alberni needs to be better connected to other communities on the island," Knezevic says. "For example we couldn't develop a wind power project because trucks carrying that infrastructure couldn't negotiate the highway around Cameron Lake."

Though government has and will continue to invest in the cross-island Highway 4, Port Alberni will be on its own to attract private investment to develop its port plans; a transportation ministry spokesperson said that government will let market forces — and private money — determine whether or not a container port in Alberni inlet is viable.

TRANSPORT AND TOURISM

Vancouver Island's \$2.2 billion tourism sector is also heavily dependent on transportation infrastructure working properly, with connections for travellers as seamless as possible. A few late or poorly timed connections can quickly kill a business trip or holiday buzz. Comox Valley's growth as an active tourism destination has been boosted hugely by expansion of air travel to YQQ, the regional airport that shares a runway with CFB Comox.

In 2004, the Comox Valley Airport Commission cut the ribbon on a new terminal, built at a cost of \$11.7 million, split between the province, feds, local tax payers and the commission. The building replaced a shabby, makeshift ATCO trailer that had been air travellers' first point of contact for years.

In 2001, prior to the new terminal being built, WestJet had already launched its first flights to the Comox Valley. It was a game changer for the region — passenger arrivals nearly doubled that year. Since then, annual arrivals have grown to more than 315,000 passengers.

But competition for carriers and passengers is fierce. In June of 2013, WestJet Encore announced flights to Nanaimo, which heated up the regional rivalry. On the plus side, for the Comox Valley, Air Canada Jazz is resuming twice-a-day service to YQQ starting in May 2015 after pulling this service several years ago. Such is the fickle nature of the airline sector as companies alter, add and drop service in response to changing demands and preferences.

"Yes, we're competitors but we're all in it to serve our communities," says Comox Airport CEO Fred Bigelow. "What's key for us is having strong links and connectivity between the airport and other modes of transportation on the Island."

CONNECTIVITY MATTERS

Connectivity is a word that pops up often in transportation and tourism discussions. It's critical for Tofino and Ucluelet, perched at land's end on Highway 4. The region is home to an upscale, heavily seasonal tourism sector. More than 800,000 people visit Long Beach every year.

Tofino, with a permanent population of roughly 1,600, can swell to a crowded tourist hub of 22,000 on some July and August days. Hoteliers like Charles McDiarmid, whose family opened the Wickaninnish Inn in 1997, need to generate almost a year's worth of revenue in a concentrated window of peak summer travel, plus a few niche off-season attractions like storm watching. McDiarmid, the hotel's managing director, says that thanks to a former military installation, Tofino and Ucluelet are blessed with a 5,000-foot airstrip and small terminal. The airport is serviced with scheduled flights run by Orca Airways and KD Air, as well as seasonal charters from American carriers like Seattle's Kenmore Air.

McDiarmid says encouraging more open skies — a federal responsibility — would help leverage the full potential of this runway. As for ferry fares, he says even the Wickaninnish Inn's luxury clientele are sensitive to increases.

Improved ground transport connections to the ferry terminal would also help make for a better visitor experience as they travel across the Island.

However, McDiarmid's biggest beef is with the state of Highway 4 and some of the treacherous curves around Kennedy Lake and over Sutton Pass. Though Tofino's isolation is part of its appeal, it's also one of its problems.

"The government spent \$600 million on Sea to Sky improvements. It's time they channeled some resources into Highway 4," says McDiarmid.

BALANCING NEEDS AND BUDGETS

Darryl Anderson, managing director of Victoria-based Wave Point Consulting, works with the private sector and government agencies on strategic transportation issues. He agrees with some of the other skeptics that *BC On The Move's* 10-year scope is too limited. It may be politically expedient but not optimal for long-range planning, he says.

Anderson believes the province needs to identify "demand drivers" on the Island. Increasingly, he says, those are less resource-based and increasingly tech, tourism and baby boomer/retiree-driven. That means air access is key, and B.C. is limited in terms of what it can do to open skies and help airports grow traffic, other than freeing up tax dollars to invest in airports.

"*BC On The Move* seems to be focused on highways and bridges and moving goods and people safely and those aren't prime needs on the island. I would say let's at least look 20 years out. I think most of my colleagues would agree with that," Anderson says.

Government, not surprisingly, believes it's right on track with transportation planning. To kick off *BC On The Move* in September 2014, Jordan Sturdy, Liberal MLA for West Vancouver - Sea to Sky and parliamentary secretary to the transportation minister, toured the Island with ministry staff. The goal was to meet stakeholders. **Douglas** requests for an interview with Sturdy were denied; questions were channeled to transport ministry public affairs officer Sonia Lowe.

Responding to critics of the process, Lowe

says that although *BC On The Move* is a 10-year plan, it is set within a longer-term provincial vision for the transportation network. As a necessity, projects are prioritized on a short term (one to three years), medium term (four to six years) and longer-term (seven to 10 + years) basis. However, she cautions that all new transportation investments will be weighed against the government's commitment to balance the budget. In other words, be prepared to be disappointed unless your pet project makes the cut.

One point that was driven home loud and clear by Islanders during Sturdy's September tour is that ferry rates are a perennial sore spot, with not only private citizens but also with businesses. Sure as it rains each November, ferry users can count on future increases already established by the BC Ferry Commission, with the next jump coming in at 3.9 percent effective April 1, 2015. What will happen during the next four-year performance term, 2016 to 2019, depends on what the ferry commissioner hears from government and the public.

It would be hard to envy the task that lies ahead for the transportation minister and his staff, as they try to balance transportation priorities among a long roster of stakeholders.

Given an unlimited pool of funds and regulatory influence, we'd have an upgraded E&N railroad with regular commuter and freight service, smooth HOV and bus-only lanes to ease congestion in the Western Communities, open skies to keep the tap of tourists turned on fully, the nasty narrow curves on Highway 4 along Cameron Lake straightened, and seamless connections between land, air and sea transport — the list goes on.

But we don't have endless funds so there will be winners and losers, depending on whose priorities prevail. One thing is almost certain, however — Islanders will most certainly find unity in their ongoing frustration with BC Ferries' rising fares.

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See the video at - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sHnfcygm0&feature=youtu.be>