

Liberals' Gateway roads face climate-change crash

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Two ambitious, far-reaching B.C. government initiatives will soon be up and running.

Right into each other.

It's going to take all the ingenuity the government message massagers can muster to reconcile the Pacific Gateway project with the climate-change plan unveiled this week.

The determined assault on greenhouse gases will concentrate mostly on transportation, which contributes about 40 per cent of the province's total emissions.

But the Gateway project is about vastly expanding the transportation infrastructure and making it as easy as possible to drive around the Lower Mainland.

How can you clamp down on tailpipe emissions at the same time you're vastly increasing the potential for more tailpipes? It's politically possible to back both initiatives at the same time, if certain parts of the problem are redefined and certain parts of the solution emphasized.

The B.C. Liberals recognized the incongruity in being simultaneous Gateway backers and climate-change crusaders. So they tried to tackle it head-on, with a section in the throne speech that attempts to explain all and even pitches the gateway as part of the climate-change package.

The trick is to concentrate on traffic jams. "The Gateway project will reduce congestion, improve traffic flow and reduce emissions from vehicle idling," said Premier Gordon Campbell's agenda-setting speech.

Traffic jams mean thousands of vehicles are idling, meaning greenhouse gases are still being emitted without the economic benefit of people actually going somewhere. Easing the gridlock means that there will at least be some vague productivity associated with the emissions.

The Liberals also cite the Gateway as a green initiative on the strength of the giant fig-leaf that's been pasted over it in the form of \$50 million worth of bike paths. "It will dramatically expand cycling networks and connect communities as never before with safer cycling paths and healthier alternatives to driving," the speech enthused.

The first line of defence when it comes to supporting the Gateway in the face of local criticism is to cite the bike paths. But the bike paths are a tiny portion of the \$3-billion plan. And there's no mistaking that the vast majority of that money is going to make it easier and more convenient to drive vehicles, not ride bikes or buses.

There's also a cute twist in the rationale for toll highways that make up part of the Lower Mainland plan. "Electronic tolls will help restrain traffic growth," the speech noted. At the

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same time they're building new highways to cope with traffic growth, they're tolling at least one to restrain it.

The Liberals have some support for the idea that there is no contradiction in fighting climate change and building more roads and bridges at the same time. The Conference Board of Canada came out with a counter-intuitive finding last year that new roads don't necessarily convince more people to drive. As long as roads just keep pace with population growth, they don't affect driving habits, the study argued.

But closer to home, there are heated arguments about the gateway's impact on traffic.

One of the big issues that the Liberals didn't get around to dealing with is sprawl. Campbell came out swinging against sprawl last year at a municipal convention, demanding more "densification" to reduce the impact of growth.

But critics say major components of the project will convince thousands more people to move into the Fraser Valley and start driving to work.

The dominant talking point for everyone who moves to the suburbs is the commute. So when Campbell and federal minister David Emerson announce a new seven-lane bridge over the Pitt River, as they did last week, it's easy to picture people talking enthusiastically about how much easier it will be to drive to work.

The Gateway project has a certain amount of green cover apart from bike paths. There's the new rapid transit projects and the promise of new regional transit options in the Okanagan, Greater Vancouver, the Fraser Valley and Victoria.

But the big point that might bridge the gap between the Gateway project and greenhouse-gas worries is the proposed new emission standard for vehicles. From 2009 to 2016, the government wants to phase in restrictions that will cut automobile carbon dioxide emissions by 30 per cent.

If that happens, the thinking is that B.C. could sustain thousands of new vehicles taking advantage of all the new freeways, perimeter roads and bridges without losing ground in the war against emissions.

It's academic to some extent, as thousands of new vehicles are added every year anyway. But new roads have a Field of Dreams impact: "If you build them, they will come."

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