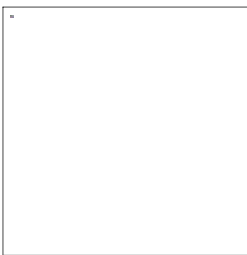




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Highway to hell: Campbell's short-term fix

By
Reporter

Premier Gordon Campbell last week suggested that his government's \$3 billion Gateway Project will help cut greenhouse gas emissions by reducing traffic congestion on the Lower Mainland's highways.

However, while it's true that slow-moving and idling vehicles produce a higher percentage of greenhouse gases and other pollutants than do those traveling at normal highway speeds, expanding highways only leads to more vehicles on the road — and unless all of those new vehicles are powered by hydrogen fuel cells, natural gas or other low-emission alternatives, greenhouse gas emissions will, sadly, only increase.

Campbell, who unveiled the Gateway plan in January, was asked for his comments last week on a new study showing that climate-change-inducing greenhouse gas emissions in B.C. have risen some 30 per cent since 1990, the baseline year for the Kyoto Accord on climate change.

According to reports, Campbell said he's concerned about rising emissions, largely the result of increased auto and truck use, but added that he thinks the Gateway Project — an ambitious plan to build new roads and bridges and promote transportation alternatives — said the plan “opens up a public transportation corridor which has been closed for the past 20 years because of congestion.”

To his credit, the Premier added, “(The plan) is a complement to the \$1.7 billion we're investing in public transit between Vancouver and Richmond, the hundreds of millions we're investing in the Evergreen line in the northeast sector of the Lower Mainland.”

We think upgrading highways is a necessary and laudable act, but only when it's done primarily to improve traffic safety, as is being done in the Sea to Sky corridor.

But if the experience of cities across North America shows us anything, it's that upgrading highways is at best a short-term fix for the problem of traffic congestion. Hey, if you build it, they will come — widening highways and bridges only increases the number of vehicles, especially when most jobs are in the core and most of the newer, more attractive places to live are on the perimeter.

The group 20/20 Vision states that the Gateway Project runs counter to the Greater Vancouver Regional District's Livable Region Strategic Plan (LRSP), which includes a commitment to building complete communities and connecting town centres via efficient transit and providing real transportation choices to commuters.

“While the LRSP works to address the structural causes of congestion, the Gateway Project focuses only on the symptoms,” it stated last month. “The experiences of cities around the world demonstrates that traffic congestion comes back quickly after new and wider highways are built. Additional development is stimulated and people begin to travel farther and more frequently until the widened highway is once again congested.”

The Green Party of B.C. opposes the the twinning of the Port Mann Bridge, a significant component of the Gateway Project. It favours what it calls less costly alternatives, including the imposition of a toll on the bridge, with the money to be used to fund public transit. “As we attempt to reduce the build-up of air pollutants that contribute to global warming and health problems, encouraging car use is not only illogical, it is irresponsible,” party leader Adriane Carr said in February.

Only careful, forward-looking planning and an unwavering commitment to transit alternatives will reduce congestion over the long term. Any effort to accomplish the task by widening roads is doomed to fail, partly because it waters down the commitment to wise planning and transit.

All British Columbians have a stake in the efficient use of the money available for transportation, and should tell their leaders that old-school, short-term thinking has no place in the process of planning for our future.

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