

## Better infrastructure: costly yet vital

ALTHOUGH THIS IS AN ELECTION YEAR only at the federal level, all three levels of government share a common need: improved infrastructure.

Interestingly, it's only at the provincial level that much has been heard about the need in recent months, and maybe it's because the current Liberal government is aware of the fact that no other province is in as much need of improvement.

As one example, no other province except perhaps British Columbia and Newfoundland and Labrador has yet to widen so little of its portion of the Trans-Canada Highway (TCH) to four lanes. But even in B.C., a dual highway is available between Vancouver and some distance east of Kamloops, and the traffic volumes in Newfoundland are well below those on the two-lane portions of Highway 17 between Sudbury and Sault Ste. Marie and west of Kenora, where those two lanes are the only ones between Ontario and Manitoba.

In the circumstances it will be interesting to see whether the election platforms of any of the three main national political parties will include a commitment to a national highway system modelled on the U.S. Interstate Highway System launched by the Eisenhower administration in the 1950s.

As we see it, such a project should involve a commitment to upgrade the TCH to a minimum of four lanes coast to coast, with most of the needed money coming from federal taxes on motor vehicle fuels.

But the TCH should also become only one of several federally financed highways that should be identified by the green maple leaf markers. Others would include the Yellowhead highway between Winnipeg and Kamloops, B.C.'s Crowsnest Highway, a new east-west route across the Prairie Provinces south of the TCH and Canadian extensions of existing north-south Interstate routes.

Perhaps the most important improvement east of Ontario would be a new highway along the north shore of the St. Lawrence and the Labrador coast to a port where a fast crossing to the island of Newfoundland could be created, initially as a ferry but ultimately as a tunnel.

As for Ontario, the major requirement apart from widening the TCH and providing a more northerly route into Manitoba would be resurrection of key portions of the provincial highway system in Southern Ontario that disappeared through downgrading in the 1990s.

Although the cash-strapped provincial treasury could not afford upgrading of thousands of kilometres, the Province could and should afford to pay a portion of the construction and maintenance costs of former trunk routes like Highways 2, 5, 7, 9, 11 and 24 based on origin-destination surveys or, in the case of Highway 2, its status as an important roadway as a scenic and historic alternative to 401.

Such a shared-cost approach would also involve ending the absurdity of having different numbering of important trunk routes like Highways 7 and 9, with the King's Highway signs replaced by county or regional road markers with the same numbers or three-digit markers like 107 and 109 which tourists must see as at best secondary routes.

At the municipal level, the infrastructure needs will vary a lot depending on the location.

In Toronto, the biggest expense will be in repairing or replacing major projects like the elevated portion of the Gardiner Expressway, while in Peel Region it will be in widening major arterial roadways like Airport Road and

Mississauga Road and in Dufferin it will be primarily in resurfacing the existing network and adding truck-passing lanes on Airport Road and Orangeville's south bypass.

And at all three levels of government, the current low crude oil prices should provide an incentive to do a lot more paving this

summer than had been planned a year ago when asphalt prices were so much higher.