

Responsible transport planning for the Vancouver region: problems with the Gateway Program accountability

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1 Introduction

The unfortunately limited scope of public consultation solicited in the conceptual or “pre-design” phase of the Gateway Program along with the simplistic recent reaction by the government to an alternative plan both call for a major reevaluation of the rationale for the Gateway Program.

A decade ago, in March 1996, over 400 stakeholders in the transport sector from 25 countries met in none other than Vancouver, British Columbia¹ to discuss the future of sustainable transportation planning. This meeting marked the beginning of a series of OECD² studies to assess the range of best-practice policy instruments and strategic methods for long-term urban transport planning. By the completion of Phase 4 of this process, in 2000, a number of unambiguous major conclusions had emerged.³ These were reflected in the broad variety of detailed strategies used by different countries in case study strategy exercises for

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¹See *OECD* (1997)

²The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is a group of wealthy nations promoting economic growth, employment, financial stability, and trade. The strongest contributors to this entire workshop series were European countries, Japan, and Canada.

³*OECD* (2002)

the period 2000-2031. Above all, these lessons from the OECD included the following principles as “critical elements”:

- Planning must be based on the use of explicit, measurable targets and “backcasting” (discussed below) rather than the antiquated paradigm of “predict and provide”
- The set of chosen policy instruments must be comprehensively planned and phased over time in order to build public will and remain politically feasible
- The highest priority and focus in the long term must be to change public attitudes

The Gateway Program’s project definition⁴ appears to fly in the face of these OECD conclusions and represents seriously outdated and deeply flawed thinking. Although the details of project planning that have gone into the Gateway Program so far need not go all to waste, **the project must not be allowed to proceed before it has been explained in the context of more far-sighted and explicit objectives.**

2 Gateway program ignorant of backcasting paradigm

In the OECD reports as well as modern textbooks on transport economics⁵, the old-fashioned practice of forecasting growth based on past or current trends and then providing for it by building new roads or other infrastructure is condemned as counter-productive. **This outmoded “predict and provide” paradigm appears to be the mantra of the Gateway Project Program Definition Report and its supporting documents.**

These documents are littered with and unified by references to projection, prediction, and accomodation. For instance:

"It is projected that there will be another 82,000 to 115,000 vehicle trips to accommodate on the road network in the morning peak hour by 2031."⁶

This manner of framing a problem constitutes a fallacy. It suggests that the location and size of future population and traffic growth are independent of policy. That is, the document implicitly compares the proposed policy (predominantly road expansion) with some (straw-man) alternative, yet this alternative is never explicitly described. The future distribution of growth will itself depend on planning policy and infrastructure investment implemented now.

Ubiquitous experience from the last several decades has led to an overwhelming concensus that you cannot cure congestion without focusing on demand. The Gateway rationale falsely assumes an exogenous amount of future traffic to be “accomodated”. Its repetitive justifications for capacity building are not a response to expected trends, but rather a guarantee that those trends of increasing traffic will continue. The OECD recommendations escape this kind of circular logic and self-fulfilling prophecy, which they dub “predict and provide” by working backwards from measurable goals.

Without accountability to a set of specific, measurable, attainable, and time-based goals, schemes offered to the public for consultation

- are difficult to assess in advance,
- embody no accountability to current standards or to the latest best-practice thought or local and foreign experience in developing transport policy,

⁴British Columbia Ministry of Transport (2006)

⁵See, for instance, throughout *Quinet and Vickerman* (2004).

⁶OECD (2002, p. 13.)

- are not conducive to assessment after the fact and therefore offer diminished value for policy adjustment or learning in future decisions.

Once goals have been laid out, a co-ordinated, phased strategic plan can be built using the four classes of policy instruments

- regulation (laws, rules)
- financial incentives (*e.g.*, taxes)
- outreach (education)
- directed (public) investment (*e.g.* in transit, road infrastructure, rail, *etc.*)

The first three address demand-side management. The fourth, which characterises almost all of the Gateway Program, offers supply-side changes.

The OECD reports emphasize above all the importance of using explicit measurable goals to “backcast” necessary policy interventions from the future backwards to the present, resulting in a phased program of policy instruments. With such a rationalised and comprehensive plan, public debate can address explicit links between features of a management plan and the performance criteria and milestones it is meant to meet, and thus help to find the most efficient policy available. The Gateway Plan boldly rejects this wisdom and offers the public little accessible logic to account for its proposal.

The following sections address this limitation of logic in more detail.

3 Implicit priorities: increasing GDP by reducing congestion for commercial truck traffic

Rather than offering explicit, measurable goals, the Gateway Program is built on some implicit but vague goals. Examining these reveals the inadequacy of the government’s proposal.

The Gateway Program appears to be motivated overall by the desire to increase British Columbia’s GDP by reducing congestion for commercial freight traffic. Minister Kevin Falcon has stated that it is the Province’s responsibility to see the “big picture” of public interest which in the Ministry’s eyes involves expanding trade from China through the GVRD.

If such goals were explicit and specific, then both their merit and the best way to reach them could be up for public debate.

For instance, if freight congestion targets were set, near and long-term demand management of single occupancy cars would likely arise as the best rational policy.⁷ Indeed, the Gateway Program’s own projections predict that without tolls, a twinned Port Mann bridge “would reach current levels of congestion 5 to 10 years after project completion.” Therefore models tell us that the tolls (demand management) rather than capacity building have a sustainable impact on the measure of merit.

If a particular GDP growth target is the ultimate objective and is the Province’s responsibility, one may ask about the time frame of interest. The Gateway Program language does not recognise that free road transport may be considered a distortion (subsidy) to the markets for worker and freight transport. Rather than being a neutral part of the healthy economic environment of the region, they reward and direct certain aspects of development. **If investing in larger highways now increases GDP tomorrow but makes the inefficiency inherent in congestion and the suburban commute cost even more to fix for the next generation, then pursuing GDP in this way amounts to putting the province in debt.** This is the nature of “unsustainability.” Indeed, it may be argued that competitive advantage for cities in a foreseeable future with high energy prices, internalised carbon costs, and higher labour costs

⁷90% of peak traffic on the Port Mann bridge consists of cars, not trucks.

in China will come from *efficient* planning in the city and even somewhat less reliance on long-distance trade nationwide. Efficient local planning and foresight in sustainability will make British Columbia an attractive region for investment and a profitable economic engine. This may require more difficult and profound initiatives than those championed in Gateway.

Case studies reviewed in the Gateway Program's own report tout regional planning experiences based on limiting highway expansion which have produced thriving communities without congestion: "Importantly, [the limited highway expansion] did all of this without sacrificing economic development."⁸

The definition report's benefit-cost assessment puts in doubt the success of the current Program proposal even on its own terms. The report admits to being unable to quantify the economic benefits it claims.

- While counting "savings" of the program, it counts none of the costs except for construction costs. This is false accounting.
- The superficial focus on certain contributions to GDP falls on the fundamental assumption that decisions by settlers and car owners are perfectly rational.
- The report claims an unquantified benefit in congestion-related idling emissions of CO₂ and air pollutants, but ignores the increase in overall emissions due to the design for increased traffic flows. The report entirely ignores various agencies' commitments to radically *reduce*, not stabilise, CO₂ emissions.
- The vast majority of anticipated economic "savings" due to road expansion are to time saved by car drivers. Yet these benefits, which for the Port Mann bridge are only due to the tolling component of the plan, are not adequately valued by car-owning decision makers and will continue to be lost to "sprawl" without more fundamental changes in commuting habits and patterns.

4 The claim of separable land use management

A major foundation of the Gateway Program's justification of its narrow scope is that demand management measures and land use policies are separable from road infrastructure investment.

This directly contradicts modern wisdom such as that of the OECD studies, which strongly advocate coherent, integrated transport policy programs which ultimately emphasise above all demand management and attitude shifting through public outreach and phased interventions. Who is right?

The Gateway Program definition refers to a companion report to justify its claims that land use changes (zoning, distribution of development, *etc.*) are affected by regulation, not by road investment, and are the prerogative of regional and local governments, not the province. **This companion report, "Transportation and land use linkages"⁹ does not support the conclusions claimed for it in the Gateway Program definition; it thus debunks a major premise of the Gateway Program.**

On a superficial level, the document is not even proof-read for grammar, punctuation, or typos, and the prose is clearly a rush job. For instance, a paragraph (here copied exactly) in the opening summary reads as nonsense:

To demonstrate the potential for zoning and land use planning to influence land development, a series of case studies are presented These case studies to highlight the potential benefits that land use controls could have. Achieving desired land use outcomes.

Several references surveyed in the report are not listed in its bibliography; another has the author misspelled.

⁸ *Gateway Program Engineer* (2005, p. 17)

⁹ *Gateway Program Engineer* (2005)

More substantially, the document is purported to show through a literature review that major transport projects might not affect the distribution of growth in cities.

From the studies reviewed in the government's own report, the appropriate conclusion is that there is strong evidence for land price and land use effects of new (even tolled) highways, especially when they affect travel time. While in highly developed cities it is increasingly unlikely that major road improvements have any significant additional effects on travel time, *it is precisely the reduction of travel time which is used to justify the Gateway Program initiatives.*

Indeed, only one study found low correlation between transport improvements and land use changes. This was refuted by all of the other studies examined except for a pair of non-peer-reviewed papers from the Buckeye Institute and the John Locke Foundation, two openly anti-government U.S. advocacy groups with a narrow and uniform set of libertarian policy prescriptions.¹⁰

The report offers three case studies, all of which are stories from the U.S. in which limited transport development has a strong effect on the quality and character of the region. The report's very odd conclusion from the three cases is "These cases outline that there is nothing inevitable about the way development occurs."¹¹ Indeed, this is the reason for explicit, objective-based planning.

While examining only evidence from the U.S.A., the report claims that in a region with "stronger land use controls" (ie presumably Canada or the GVRD?) the effect of transport infrastructure will be less. There is no evidence for this claim; indeed, the opposite seems likely.

The reality is that the Gateway Program has significant impact on the more comprehensive development plans and visions of local and regional governments. The OECD reports conclude that plans must be integrated. The Gateway initiatives must therefore be given context transparently in terms of explicit, measurable goals such as those which have been delineated as part of the Livable Region Strategic Plan and its annual progress reports.

The Canadian team reporting to the OECD study on policy programs for transport planning¹² determined that major changes must be put in place starting immediately in order to achieve sustainable transportation targets by 2030. Massive initiatives such as the Gateway Program represent tremendous opportunities and responsibilities to incorporate sensible long term planning and to recognise the full effects of policy on other levels of government and on future governments.

5 Provincial policy on tolling

The Gateway Program definition ostensibly considers alternative policy directions such as system-wide tolling or tolling without infrastructure improvement. However, there is no substantial discussion beyond the claim that the Province is not allowed to undertake these policies; they are simply "not considered viable options". This, obviously, begs the question.

The "Guidelines for tolling"¹³ were released in 2003, during the Gateway Program planning period. They are directed at the promotion of public-private partnerships (PPPs) and are clearly government choice, not external constraints on Gateway Program strategic options.

¹⁰For instance, the Buckeye Institute claims to be devoted to "representing the viewpoint of individual liberty, economic freedom, personal responsibility and limited government in the policy debates about Ohio's present and future." Similarly, the John Locke Foundation of North Carolina advertises its focus on nine problems, including:

- The costly, immoral, and destructive welfare state.
- Oppressive rules and regulations on business.
- Traffic congestion and transportation safety.
- Lack of economic opportunities for all citizens.
- A decline of individual freedom and self-reliance.

¹¹ *Gateway Program Engineer* (2005, p. 17)

¹² *OECD* (2002)

¹³ *BC Ministry of Transportation* (2003)

These guidelines refer to a "right" to free access and therefore require a free feasible alternative to a tolled route of transport. There is no explanation of how free roadways are to be considered a right in Canada or British Columbia. Regardless, imposing tolls on single occupancy cars using major GVRD waterway crossings when congestion is high, for example, would leave the free alternatives of travelling the same route at night or carpooling during rush-hour.

6 Gateway's response to a transit alternative

The memo commissioned from Halcrow Consulting¹⁴ in response to a proposal for a transit-only investment approach to traffic on the Port Mann Bridge embraces the "predict and provide" paradigm of old days. Nevertheless, its claims may be taken to point out that **free or heavily subsidised transit is not a cure-all solution to congestion, just like building more highways is not**. Both give the wrong signals to individual decision makers. Instead, transit options must be costly to discourage sprawl but be made more desirable than car ownership to an increasing fraction of people. These insights come from the extensive OECD studies. While organised transport infrastructure of any kind solves a coordination problem and can have economic benefits, those benefits are lost and reversed when transport is too available or too cheap. It appears that collectively individuals make poor decisions when transport is overly subsidised and end up reducing both their productivity and welfare by partaking in the construction of inefficient, sprawling development. The optimal balance is delicate, which is why policy must be comprehensive, integrated, long-term, phased, and focused ultimately on changing habits and expectations.

The Gateway Project plan — and its response to the Livable Region Coalition's compelling demand for a better consideration of provincial investment in transit — do not so far reflect this subtlety.

7 Conclusion

These deep problems with the Gateway rationale, its published documents, and its public accountability must be addressed before controversial aspects of the plan such as the twinning of the Port Mann bridge are further pursued. It is vital that all regional and civic stakeholders demand an accountable, rationalised plan in order most efficiently and transparently to reach the economic development goals that are best for B.C. and the greater Vancouver region.

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¹⁴Halcrow Consulting Inc (2006)