



Manitoba on a road to ruin Dedicate our Gas Taxes!!! A 5-Step Solution to Crumbling Highways

There is a crisis looming in Manitoba today. It touches Manitobans in many ways: it affects their safety, their economic stability, the sustainability of their towns and their job security.

In short, this crisis hits every Manitoban where it hurts – and it may surprise you to learn that every aspect of this crisis is related to our crumbling provincial highways.

Gasoline taxes were first introduced in the 1940s for the sole purpose of funding the construction and maintenance of highways. However, successive provincial governments have blatantly ignored that responsibility. Today, the gas taxes that you and I pay are directed to general revenues, and almost as an after-thought, towards building and maintaining our highways!

Because of decades of government neglect, highways are suffering severe deterioration of which successive provincial governments are aware. In 1996 a government study estimated that \$180 million was required annually in the capital budget for each of the next 10 years to bring the system up to an acceptable standard – a \$1.8 billion investment over 10 years.

Inaction on that recommendation has resulted in a ballooned highways investment deficit. By 2001 a follow-up provincial study revealed that the government now should invest \$240 million annually over the next 20 years just to bring Manitoba highways up to a safe, acceptable standard – a \$4.8 billion 20 year investment deficit.

Mark my words: at the current level of investment of approximately \$100 million per year, Manitobans will experience a dramatic decline in the quality and safety of highways.

But, why should you care? How do provincial highways relate to your safety, your economic stability and your job security?

In terms of safety, highway neglect accelerates deterioration, making the chance of an accident more likely. Collisions on Manitoba highways already cause needless deaths, injuries, property losses and health care costs. Are you really willing to risk the lives of your family to a highway that the government has knowingly neglected?

Not only is the health of your family at risk on sub-standard highways, the health and life of your vehicle is too. Motorists can blame poor highway conditions for increased annual operating costs of approximately \$400 for each vehicle. For a two-car family, that's \$800 per year.

Nowadays, the world is on wheels. Everything that Manitoba manufactures, from furniture, to foods, to buses, is transported via truck. The \$17 billion worth of goods exported and imported on Manitoba highways must be able to move safely and efficiently.

In addition, many long-haul truckers are opting to travel on the smooth, well-manicured highways of the U.S., instead of over the rough, white-knuckled experience drive through Manitoba and Canada. This choice spells disaster for the dozens of small towns and communities that dot our provincial highways. Many of these towns depend on the motoring public to sustain their restaurants, hotels and service stations. Without this business, the economic viability of these communities is threatened.

Finally, highway construction employs approximately 15,000 Manitobans directly and indirectly. We are not only referring to those who actually build the roads, but the companies who lease the equipment to the builders, the engineers who design the roads, the truckers who deliver product over them, those who sell gas, food and other services to those truck drivers, and a multitude of other workers whose livelihood somehow depends on highways.

Fortunately there are cost-free solutions that do not involve raising taxes. With a provincial budget to be tabled on April 22nd, some suggestions to nip this problem in the bud.

The first step is simple: dedicate all provincial road-use related gas taxes exclusively to highway construction and maintenance. This accounts for roughly \$200 million per year.

Second: in order to reduce administration costs, the province should establish an arm's length agency, a Manitoba Transportation Investment Authority, whose mandate would be to collect gas taxes and invest them back into highways.

Third: take the federal government to task for its responsibility for Manitoba's portion of the national highways system – the Trans Canada, Highway #75, the Yellowhead #16 and the South Winnipeg Perimeter. – which account for only 4% of Manitoba's highways. Demand that Ottawa return the annual federal gasoline taxes paid by Manitobans back to Manitobans. Even 50 per cent would add \$75 million to the province's yearly highway budget.

Fourth: reduce, re-use, and recycle. This motto can be applied to the construction of our highways. The use of modern technologies, material recycling and innovative design *will* lower construction and material costs for road building and will improve our environment overall.

Fifth: the province needs to establish a five-year capital budget to allow more planning time to assign roadwork contracts earlier to engineers and construction companies. This efficiency will save up to 15 per cent in construction costs. Winnipeg can do it, why not the provincial government?

Remember, transportation is not an accessory - it is a necessity. The next time you travel on a Manitoba highway riddled with surface breaks and potholes, think about how the product you just bought, got to the store from which you bought it. Think about the damage being done to your vehicle, the safety threat imposed on your family and the thousands of workers who may be unemployed because the province won't make our highways a priority.

Mr. Premier – why don't we have your attention?



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