



Manitoba's economy needs investment in trade corridors



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Earlier this summer, Infrastructure Minister Ron Schuler set out his government's vision to make this province Canada's trade hub, and proposed a strategic infrastructure investment plan to get us there within a decade.

We support recognition of Manitoba Infrastructure's role to position Manitoba as a global trade hub. The Manitoba Heavy Construction Association has always seen this province as the keystone in Canada's trade domestically, continentally, to Asia and beyond.

Manitoba enjoys unique geographic features that make it a trade hub: ground, air, rail and – yes – marine ports to all cardinal points. Churchill, in fact, is Canada's only Arctic deep-water shipping port.

The MHCA's advocacy priorities are rooted in the belief that Manitoba is a trading province, its economy heavily dependent on trade's immediate and long-term return to the GDP.

And so, our industry fully supports the province's stated intent to create a strategic infrastructure investment plan. A call for such a plan has been central to MHCA's advocacy recommendations for decades.

In basic terms, the Infrastructure Department's four categories for investment, outlined in the proposal as guidance for infrastructure strategy and short-term investment planning, are solid.

In the MHCA response to the proposal, however, we suggested that rather than setting out a hierarchy of criteria for project and infrastructure investment planning, that the provinces take a more holistic approach.

We see the four categories – renewal; safety and climate resiliency; economic development; connectivity and innovation – as intrinsically related.

The primary objective must be economic development/growth – without which government cannot be assured of adequate revenues with which to fund infrastructure investment or the critical social services Manitobans rely upon.

Climate resilience is closely tied to the goal of economic growth and prosperity.

Renewal, safety and connectivity, as priorities, are integral elements to those prime concerns. Infrastructure assets that are maintained, renewed and connected support safety and environmental stewardship goals.

So how can the province arrange an infrastructure investment strategy that balances the inter-related but sometimes competing goals?

The MHCA proposes that Manitoba's investment priorities should consider the immediate and longer-term returns that flow from the project. That must also consider avoidance of future costs that can flow from strong asset management (renewal) and planning (climate resiliency).

MHCA's principles for strategic infrastructure investment are anchored by the goal of economic growth. And economic growth, for Manitoba and Canada, is tethered tightly to our trade profile and productivity.

In our view, a strong infrastructure investment strategy is one that is informed by and built upon:

- an infrastructure investment deficit analysis, which sets out the condition of provincial highways, bridges, water and wastewater and water-control structures, and the cost of bringing those assets to good shape
- an infrastructure asset-management plan, which attributes value to transportation system and core infrastructure assets, and sets out a manageable schedule for maintenance,

renewal or new construction to meet the needs of a growing population and diversified economy

- dedicated annual and five-year, rolling capital budgets that are supported by sustained and incremental increases, to realize the vision and objective of the infrastructure investment strategy – growth, respect for the environmental and social wealth.

Manitoba Infrastructure's approach to planning has taken important, first steps to ensuring that Manitoba's trade-based economy can be secured, through strategic infrastructure planning and investment.

It has set out to raise identified provincial highways and roads to RTAC rating (a nationally recognized weight-loading classification standard), such that the transportation needs of rural residents, businesses, producers and manufacturers are not impeded by weight-limited routes or seasonal road conditions. This approach underpins provincial trade productivity.

Moving goods to market, however, demands strategic alignment of our trade routes and corridors with regional and national networks, ultimately, to assure current and potential trade partners and markets that we can deliver our products to them, and theirs to us.

This is why the MHCA, itself and through its membership in the Western Canada Roadbuilders and Heavy Construction Association, has called upon the federal government to renew the national trade policy framework and recapitalize the national trade corridor investment program.

Further and for Western Canada, the WCR&HCA, joined by the Canadian Construction Association, has proposed the Western Canada Trade Gateways & Corridors Initiative (WCTG&CI). Western Canada, our country's port to a vast, untapped Asian market, is indispensable to Canada's trade profile and productivity and, therefore, its economic health and prosperity.

The importance of Manitoba's engagement and role in a WCTG&CI cannot be overstated. This province is a trade hub, connected to all cardinal points for trade: Emerson is the busiest land crossing west of Windsor; Churchill is Canada's only Arctic port served by a Class A railroad. Its unique geographic advantages, therefore, are critical to making the region Canada's trade port to Asia, in particular.

That's why we say that Manitoba's own infrastructure investment strategy must be crafted to position this province for its own trade and economic growth, while feeding into the WCTG&CI to elevate the trade profile of Western Canada.

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