

Dollars and sense and roads

By: Chris Lorenc Posted: **2:00 AM CST Tuesday, Nov. 21, 2023**

Concrete projectiles endangering lives.

Ice so thick you'd be better off on blades than wheels.

There was no better illustration of the serious need for investment in Manitoba's highways than the state of Highway 75 this year.

It's the result of both a lack of sufficient maintenance and capital planning, a serious problem that has compounded over the decades.

The *Free Press* is right: *Maintenance is key to road safety* (Editorial, Nov. 13). It is also critical to economic growth.

For too many years, there's been too little love for Manitoba's transportation network, generally, at budget time.

And it's most obvious — and embarrassing — on the roads we rely upon disproportionately for travel and to support Manitoba's economy.

Trade generates 53 per cent of our GDP.

Manitoba produces more than it can consume, domestically, and shipping goods to continental and global markets generates the tax revenue that supports the social programs we so badly need today.

But you can't sell what you can't deliver.

That demands a well-maintained transportation network, supported by long-term, strategic asset-management and investment planning. And that, as far as we know, doesn't exist on a provincial level.

There is a model that works.

In Winnipeg, this summer, there was a fair amount of grumbling, understandably, about construction zones tying up the commute.

A good piece of that work happened on the regional streets that carry 80 per cent of city traffic. Regional streets are prioritized because they are central to our economy — moving people to jobs and goods to market.

In short, the work on Winnipeg's regional roads is an investment — an economic investment.

The volume of work that happened this year is a direct result of Winnipeg's deliberate, publicly posted asset-management and investment plan that identifies regional streets as trade corridors, assesses a condition rating for all streets and prioritizes construction where it's most needed to support the economy.

So when additional funds flowed from the federal Investment in Canada Infrastructure program, projects were lined up quickly, tendered and out the procurement gates.

What's more, because the plan is public, citizens can judge the city by the results.

Remarkably, we can't say the same for our highways, provincial roads and bridges.

Now, back to the provincial problem with maintenance and strategic investment.

We know Manitoba's highways and bridges need a lot of work — in fact, \$9 billion worth of work.

But taxpayers have never seen the province's report on the condition and investment need of our transportation system — if one exists, it is not public.

That's untenable — we need to talk about this problem with hard facts and figures, not anecdotes. Manitobans deserve to know the true condition of their roads and how their government thinks it can get out of the \$9-billion hole we've dug.

This is about our standard of living.

Trade supports roughly 240,000 jobs in this province.

It supports families, agricultural producers, manufacturers, truck drivers, mom-and-pop shops and Etsy buyers and sellers.

Manitobans depend on good roads to connect to each other, to schools, hospitals, our jobs and our recreation haunts. We need a system that supports our communities, our population growth and a vibrant economy.

Premier Wab Kinew stated often during the recent election campaign that the economic horse pulls the social cart. He made increasing Manitoba's trade productivity a central plank in his economic growth platform.

And he put his full support behind investing in our trade corridors, as fundamental to the economy.

His government has an opportunity now to put some muscle behind those commitments to take a necessary first step for a necessary fresh start.

We need the provincial government to trust Manitobans with the facts, to release a report that shows the condition of our roads, a plan to start resolving the \$9-billion investment deficit and to build a transportation network that can deliver the goods, today and for the years ahead.

That's a future we can all support, for greater prosperity we can all share in.

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