Okanagan needs 100-year transportation strategy

by Dr. Gord Lovegrove

It's time for a 100-mile road diet. Several emerging issues are putting the health, prosperity, and mobility of Okanagan Valley residents and businesses in jeopardy. A comprehensive 100-year Okanagan Valley transportation strategy is needed to address them, and to sustain our social, economic, and environmental well-being.

The Okanagan Partnership is an industry-led, non-profit society directed by more than 34 individuals from business, First Nation, academic and non-profit sectors throughout the Okanagan. The partnership is dedicated to the vision of a prosperous and sustainable Okanagan region that provides a high quality of life for all inhabitants. As a neutral convener of the marketplace, the partnership fosters a culture of regional collaboration and encourages, develops, implements, and evaluates action-based strategies, particularly those based on economic clusters that enhance the Okanagan's competitive advantage globally.

Our lives generally take place within a geographical region, a zone within which goods, services, and people travel each day. A collaborative regional culture enables businesses, governments, and organizations to work together, to commit to new ways of doing business, and to make investments that are mutually beneficial. To ensure a high quality of life, the partnership is looking broadly at topics of concern such as a sustainable economy, housing, transportation, and water and/or air quality in the context of regional planning.

CLIMATE CHANGE

To reverse global warming trends, and the risks they pose to our human, economic, and environmental health, it has been suggested that drastic changes in our travel habits (e.g., reduced auto dependence) are required. However, sprawl, low-density development, single-use neighbourhoods, extensive highway networks, and plentiful free parking, all coupled with limited alternatives to driving, have frustrated civic efforts and sustainability advocates to date. As a result, transit and bicycle use remain very low, at less than five percent of all trips. While many have suggested that various combinations of 'sticks' and 'carrots' could be adopted by communities in the short and even medium term to bring change, little has happened. However, a second emerging issue will certainly add some urgency.

PEAK OIL

Scientists worldwide are forecasting that discovery of major oil and natural gas reserves have peaked (or will have peaked by 2010), and as that peak is passed, the supply of carbon-based fuels will not keep up with growing world demand (www.peakoil.net). This peak was first forecast by a petroleum industry scientist named Hubbert in the early 1950s. Nearly sixty years later, not only was he right, but economists are forecasting that the price of domestic gasoline will at least double within ten years. Moreover, researchers estimate that our petroleum supplies won't last much more than our generation. Estimates range from somewhere between 50 and 200 years, depending on our efforts to conserve, alternate fuel source creation, and extraction technology improvements.

Renewable energy sources (agri-based, solar-based, hydro-based, or otherwise) will be the basis for future transportation, but currently cost much higher per unit of energy than conventional fuels. Based on the lack of progress to date, research and development of cheaper, more cost effective alternative fuels will not occur in time

to facilitate a smooth transition. Even relying on market incentives to add impetus, it is likely that a significant gap between supply and demand will occur, causing economic instability as prices for remaining fuel stocks skyrocket.

Given that the high price and limited supply of conventional fuel will preclude its continued use, it is very likely that conventional means of transportation (e.g., private vehicles, SUVs, long-haul trucking) will diminish. While some of these higher fuel costs might be passed to consumers for commercial goods, at some price point locally produced cheaper substitutes will begin to become more attractive and the long-haul trucking sector will no longer be competitive with more efficient transportation modes. Vehicles that remain will have to be retrofitted to use more sustainable forms of energy, most likely depending heavily on hybrid or electric energy drives. The problem with electric vehicles, however, continues to be their energy storage system-batteries — which limits their range between charges. Given even optimistic outlooks, electric cars and trucks can expect to be limited in range to several hundred kilometres, precluding long-haul goods delivery by trucks, long valley-wide commutes, and long cross-country vacations. A strategic opportunity to consider is that electric railways will become a critical short- and long-haul alternative for commuters, tourists, and businesses in the Okanagan Valley.

ELECTRIC RAIL

Electric rail is a well-established technology, widely used in Europe, and could be incorporated into existing Okanagan rail infrastructure relatively quickly, subject to rail gauges, and electric (overhead pick-up) motive units. Moreover, rail corridors already exist along much of the Okanagan Valley, between Vernon and Kelowna, and, between Summerland and our border with the US. Many wish to see an Okanagan rail corridor become a reality, including the Via 97 group, a US business consortium with ties to important American tourism and business markets.

Unfortunately, time is running out to secure needed right-of-way and to build an electric rail link across the Okanagan Valley. The most critical segment would run across Okanagan Lake, and south through Westbank and Peachland to Summerland. Formal engineering planning and design processes would need to confirm costs, routes, technology, and feasibility. However, a ballpark estimate based on a $10-million per mile unit price for heavy rail infrastructure produces a cost in present dollars of $1 billion. Unaffordable and unjustifiable today, but perhaps not so unaffordable if part of a long-term investment over the next 50 or 100 years. At current investment and inflation rates, a $20-million-per-year investment would well exceed that mark. An electric railway for our valley is reachable at roughly the time it would be needed. Unfortunately, even $20 million per year is an insurmountable sum for Okanagan Valley jurisdictions concerned with the disparate and often conflicting priorities of local constituents. To overcome this challenge, a concerted, united effort of all Okanagan Valley stakeholders-citizens, all levels of government, and businesses-would be needed, along with strong leadership. In that vain, the Okanagan Partnership, in response to public comments received at a series of public forums held throughout the Okanagan Valley in the summer of 2007, proposes the following for public comment.

VISION FOR A REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY

The establishment of an Okanagan Regional Transportation Authority (ORTA) to oversee the provision of a sustainable inter-regional transportation system is essential to maintaining the high quality of life in the Okanagan. Subject to legislation, this authority would deliver services — planning, funding, construction, operation, and/or governance — for municipalities throughout the Okanagan. Representation on the authority would come from the three regional districts of the Okanagan, North Okanagan Regional District (NORD), Central Okanagan Regional District (CORD), Regional District of Okanagan Similkameen (RDOS). Provincial and federal interests would also need to be integrated into this new authority's operation.

ORTA Goals:

- Promote a sustainable and prosperous economy

- Promote healthy lifestyles and a pristine environment
- Increase the use of transit, carpooling, car sharing, bike paths, and walking
- Reduce the social & economic burden of road crashes, injuries, and fatalities
- Reduce air pollution due to over-reliance on single occupancy vehicles (SOVs)
- Reduce lost wages and lost productivity due to excessive congestion and delays.

Initial ORTA Strategies:

- Provide enhanced transit and auto-alternative services within each region to ensure improved transportation choices
- Increase and improve transit, bicycling, and pedestrian infrastructure
- Index funding to growth for transit, carpooling, car sharing, bicycling, and walking
- Provide a north-south electric rail line across the Okanagan to improve inter-regional and international goods, commuter, and tourism access and connectivity.

IN CLOSING...

Whether we like it or not, global warming and peak oil are coming, sooner or later. The sooner we start planning for it, the better. Electric rail is a viable option that is within our grasp, but only if we start investing now, together. Think about it the next time you (pre-pay and) fill up, or the next time you're stuck in traffic. You can pay now and a lot more later, or, we can all pay a little now and a lot less later. It's your call, or as we say at UBC, Tuum es!.

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