

Investing in Northern Ontario's Highway Infrastructure

Issue

Continuing investment to complete the four-laning of the remaining 68 kilometres of Highway 69 (Highway 400 North) should be the first step to rectifying a critical transportation infrastructure gap that has limited Ontario's economic potential, ability to attract and retain workers, and connectivity regionally, provincially and nationally.

Background

Highway 69 is the main connective road between Northern and Southern Ontario. It connects Highway 400 North with the City of Greater Sudbury (the largest municipality in Northern Ontario), where it meets Highway 17 West headed toward Sault Ste. Marie and further on to Western Canada. It acts as the funnel for Southern Ontario people, businesses and tourists heading North and vice versa. It is a critical link in the Trans-Canada Highway, connecting the Greater Toronto Area and Northern Ontario to Western Canada.

The highway, between Highway 559 north of Parry Sound to Highway 607 south of Sudbury, is an 81 km stretch of narrow, hilly, winding two-lane road that offers little maneuverability. In 2021, work was completed on the four-laning of a 14 km section of Highway 69, from Highway 607 to Highway 522. Plans to expand Highway 69 were originally announced in 1991, however, since that point, the project has been paused, modified and forgotten by successive provincial governments.

The provincial government should commit to completing the four-laning of Highway 69 to:

- Unlock Ontario's economic potential.
- Reduce highway closures due to accidents (often with fatalities) and weather.
- Help businesses that depend on this highway get their goods to market.
- Improve Ontario's inter- and intra-provincial connectivity.
- Support Northern Ontario's business expansion and labour recruitment and retention efforts.

Unlocking Ontario's Economic Potential

Investment in highway infrastructure has long been recognized as a viable method of creating good-paying jobs. Investing in Northern Ontario's highway infrastructure would create well-paying jobs that would contribute not just to local communities, but to the province's economy as a whole, during the project and for many decades after. A 2011 study by the U.S. Council of Economic Advisers found that every \$1 billion in highway investment could support 13,000 direct, indirect and induced jobs.

Even while Ontario's economy has improved significantly over the past few decades, most of those gains have remained contained in Southern Ontario and have not been realized in the North. Investing in Northern Ontario's highway infrastructure can help revitalize regional economies, which in turn can help unlock Ontario's economic potential.



Whether due to weather conditions or fatal collisions on the narrow, undivided road, Highway 69 is often closed for extended periods of time, adding hours to commutes and disrupting reliable access to and from Northern Ontario for businesses, residents, and tourists. A safer and more reliable Highway 69 would have a positive impact on regional and provincial productivity by improving ease of access and mobility and reducing the time it takes to transport materials or finished goods, especially for businesses reliant on “just in time” delivery to achieve maximum productivity efficiencies. Four-laning Highway 69 would have a positive cascading effect on not just the economies around the Highway, but all of Ontario.

Improving Ontario’s Inter- and Intra-Provincial Connectivity

Successful inter- and intra-provincial trade is dependent on a safe, reliable, and convenient highway network that allows passengers, heavy transports and tourists to travel across the province and country. The Highway was designed at a time when the majority of freight traffic was still being transported by railway, and the two-lane highway cannot accommodate increased transport traffic. Frequent highway closures due to collisions, which often result in fatalities, can have a significant adverse impact on commercial activity, and act as an economic and tourist deterrent. Completing the four-laning of Highway 69 will help improve traffic flow, safety, and reliability. In its current two-lane state, the highway negatively impacts residents, businesses and the supply chain of the entire province.

Reversing Northern Ontario’s Declining Population Trends

It is difficult to attract and retain people and investment to Northern Ontario when safe and convenient transportation to Southern Ontario and other parts of Canada is lacking. With reduced flight service in Northern Ontario, and little to no passenger rail service, building an adequate highway connecting Northern and Southern Ontario is not only critical to the region’s economy but to the sustainability of northern communities. The province cannot afford to neglect such alarming trends in northern communities, as they are critical to Ontario’s economy.

Recommendations

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario to:

1. Commit to investing in Northern Ontario’s transportation infrastructure, by committing to an expeditious completion timeline for the four-laning of Highway 69.
2. Adopt the recommendations of the connecting the North transportation plan for Northern Ontario, which include the need for connected, safe and reliable transportation systems in the region.
3. When prioritizing highway infrastructure investments, consider the impacts of collisions, injury, deaths, economic growth, and regional and northern development.
4. Include details about the four-laning of Highway 69 in provincial budgets.

