

B. Investing in Northern Ontario's Highway Infrastructure

Submitted by: Greater Sudbury Chamber of Commerce. Co-Sponsored by Timmins Chamber of Commerce.

Issue

Northern Ontario suffers from an infrastructure deficit. Continuing investment to complete the four-laning of Highway 69 (Highway 400 North) should be the first step to rectifying a critical infrastructure shortage that has limited Ontario's economic potential, ability to attract and retain workers, and connectivity both within the province and across Canada.

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 residents, businesses, and tourists heading north and vice versa. Moreover, it is an integral link in the Trans-Canada Highway, connecting the Greater Toronto Area and Northern Ontario to Western Canada.

Plans to expand Highway 69 were originally announced in 1991. Despite its importance as a trans-Canada highway, Highway 69 and other northern highways still suffer from a lack of timely and adequate investment. From April 2021 to March 2022, the Ontario government is committing \$2.6 billion to repair and expand provincial highways and bridges of which only 0.24% is earmarked for Northern Ontario.⁷⁸

In late December 2021, the four-laning of a 14-km stretch of Highway 69 from Highway 607 to Highway 522 was completed with plans to complete the final roadside remediation on this section by the summer of 2022. Ontario's Ministry of Transportation (MTO) states that the remaining two-laned 68-kilometre section of the highway from Parry Sound to French River is still in the engineering and property acquisition phases and that construction on the remaining section depends on the acquisition of lands and environmental approvals. There is no way to predict the length of time that it will take to complete this section of the highway.

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 inclement weather;
- Help businesses who depend on this highway get their goods to market;
- Improve Ontario's inter- and intra-provincial connectivity;
- Support regional economic development to reverse Northern Ontario's declining population trends.

Unlocking Ontario's Economic Potential:

Investment in highway infrastructure has long been recognized as a viable method of creating good-paying, middle class 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.

Most economic growth in the province remains contained in Southern Ontario and has not been realized in the North. Between 2000 and 2020, Northern Ontario has seen 9 years of negative real GDP growth since 2000, while Southern Ontario only saw 3 years of the same.⁷⁹ Investing in Northern Ontario's highway infrastructure can help revitalize regional economies, which in turn can help unlock Ontario's

⁷⁸ <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontarios-highway-programs>

⁷⁹ Email from Northern Policy Institute Staff – 11 January, 2022

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. According to the MTO, there were a total of 38 closures due to accidents on Highway 69 in the Sudbury area from 2019 to 2021 and of these, the highway was fully closed a total of 16 times.⁸⁰

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

Reversing Northern Ontario’s Declining Population Trends:

A 2020 Come North Conference report showed that all 11 census districts in Northern Ontario, are experiencing labour shortages, population decline, or population aging.⁸¹ . Investments in northern highway infrastructure will serve to attract and retain residents and workers to northern and rural regions.

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 inadequate. With the federal government’s changes to aviation regulations risking reduced flight service in Northern Ontario, and little to no passenger rail service, building a robust highway connecting Northern and Southern Ontario is not only critical to the region’s economy but to the sustainability of Northern Ontario’s communities as well. 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. Expedite investments in Northern Ontario's transportation infrastructure by planning and funding the completion of Highway 69 to four lanes; and
2. When highway upgrades and improvements are studied, consider traffic volumes in relation to the rate of accidents, injury, deaths, economic advantage, as well as the potential for increased traffic volumes and economic benefits of increased volumes.

Effective Date: April 30, 2022

Sunset Date: April 30, 2025

⁸⁰ Email from Ministry of Transportation Northeast Operations Staff – 06 December, 2021

⁸¹ <https://www.northernpolicy.ca/upload/documents/come-north/en-come-north-conference-report-20-12-11.pdf>