

Twinned tunnel part of Victoria's long-term plan

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The provincial government's long-term road-building plans include a second mega-project on the scale of the \$3-billion Gateway Program, studies done for the Gateway plan show.

The second project would include twinning the George Massey Tunnel under the south arm of the Fraser River between Richmond and Delta, expanding Highway 99 on both sides of the tunnel from four lanes to six, and building a new four-lane expressway to connect Highway 99 with the Trans-Canada Highway.

However, there are no immediate plans to build it.

The Gateway Program calls for the Port Mann Bridge over the Fraser to be twinned, widening of the Trans-Canada Highway on both sides of the bridge and building new truck routes on both shores of the river.

The longer-term plan -- dubbed "the H99 project" by British transportation consultants Steer Davies Gleave, who did the major studies for the Gateway plan -- "is still in the early stages of development for possible future long-term implementation," their report notes.

The report -- not yet public but obtained by The Vancouver Sun -- says the H99 project is similar to the Gateway plan "in that it assumes a widening of both the Fraser River crossing, in this case the new bore next to the existing George Massey (Deas) Tunnel, and widening of a length of the existing highway to both the north and south of the crossing."

The project is on the back burner in part because it would put pressure on traffic bottlenecks to the north, requiring expansion of the Oak Street and Knight Street bridges into Vancouver or a new bridge into Burnaby.

Gateway Program executive director Mike Proudfoot said Wednesday the Highway 99 plan is one of many proposals for the region.

"That would be part of our longer-term strategy," he said. "The Gateway Program corridors are the priority ones."

The Steer Davies Gleave report is one of several "companion documents" to the Gateway plan. It is the only major document not yet posted on the Gateway Program's website, Proudfoot said.

In the report, the consultants envision a much more extensive tolling system than the one

announced at the end of January by Transportation Minister Kevin Falcon.

Falcon's plan calls for a \$2.50 one-way toll to cross the twinned Port Mann Bridge, but no other tolls.

Most of the traffic models studied by the consultants included a lower toll on the Port Mann plus "distance tolls" on the expanded section of the Trans-Canada Highway and on the new South Fraser Perimeter Road.

The consultants' "preferred scenario" included a \$1 toll on the Port Mann for cars, plus distance tolls of 10 cents per kilometre on the expanded section of the Trans-Canada and on the South Fraser road.

Light trucks would pay 1 1/2 times as much as cars, and heavy trucks twice as much. The tolls would be collected electronically and vehicles would not have to stop to pay. They would rise with inflation.

The consultants envisioned similar tolls on the Highway 99 project: \$1 to use the Massey Tunnel and distance tolls on an expanded Highway 99 and the Highway 99-Trans-Canada connector.

The tolls could fluctuate with time of day or with the level of traffic congestion, and other "road-pricing" measures could include allowing single-occupant vehicles to use priority lanes if they pay an additional toll.

The Gateway project definition report, released earlier by Falcon, says a toll on the South Fraser road was rejected because it would encourage some drivers to find alternate routes through the local road network in Delta and Surrey.

"We have no intention of tolling the South Fraser Perimeter Road, period," Proudfoot said, describing the consultants' report as "one of many pieces of technical information."

However, it is the only one of the newly posted reports that includes detailed traffic forecasts based on various tolling scenarios. But those scenarios do not include the one announced by Falcon: the \$2.50 toll on the Port Mann and no distance tolls.

Falcon said earlier that without tolls, the new road capacity created by the Gateway project would be filled up and current congestion levels would return in five to 10 years after the project is built.

With the Port Mann toll, Falcon said the project will serve the region's needs to 2031 "and beyond."

But the documents do not include a specific study to support that claim.

"There isn't such a thing at this point, I think," NDP transportation critic David Chudnovsky said.

Chudnovsky said Falcon had assured him last fall such information would be posted. "Well, it's not there."

Falcon could not be reached Wednesday.

Chudnovsky said he also looked in vain for studies on the project's effects on air quality, workable public transit options, and a long-term strategy for regional transportation demand management.

"There's nothing on transportation demand management, there's nothing on the

environment, and there's nothing on public transit except vague references to 'somewhere down the line,' " he said.

Proudfoot said the tolling plan for the Gateway Program was based on "analysis in that over-all report and additional technical work that we have done," including forecasts of traffic volumes, population and employment growth and working with municipal governments.

The government rejected tolls on the North Fraser perimeter road and on the new Pitt River bridge because TransLink's Golden Ears Bridge across the Fraser will be tolled, and provincial policy requires there be a "reasonable" free alternative before a route can be tolled.

The nearest free alternative to the Trans-Canada-Port Mann route is the Pattullo Bridge between New Westminster and Surrey, but it is old, narrow and seriously congested at peak times. The consultants said that in the case of the Pattullo option, "the definition of reasonable is subjective."

The report points out the province's tolling policy is in conflict with TransLink's transportation strategy, which calls for tolls and other "road pricing" measures to manage transportation demand, while the ministry sees tolls principally as revenue generators to help pay for projects.

The consultants said an extensive system of road pricing and region-wide tolling in Greater Vancouver "is only likely in the medium to long term."

The Gateway plan does include measures the government says will help control traffic demand, such as new HOV (high occupancy vehicle) lanes that will be shared by transit buses, and "ramp metering" at interchanges to limit the number of vehicles that can enter the highway, depending on traffic conditions.

The interchanges will have "truck friendly geometry" to allow big trucks to merge with highway traffic, and queue jumpers -- bypass lanes -- that can be used to give transit, commercial vehicles and high-occupancy vehicles priority over other traffic.

The consultants advised the government that regional tolling can be sold to the public if it is clearly seen as a way to manage traffic and control congestion, rather than as just another set of taxes.

"Road pricing aims to reduce congestion, improve environmental conditions, generate revenues and provide a system of fairer taxation," they said, "whilst tolling is generally regarded as a revenue-generating tool to finance the construction and maintenance of new or enhanced infrastructure."

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