



LONG-TERM THINKING FOR TODAY'S ISSUES

March 10, 2021

System Planning Office, System Planning Branch
Integrated Policy and Planning Division
Ontario Ministry of Transportation
777 Bay St, 7th Floor, Suite 700
Toronto, ON M7A 2J8

Via email: NorthernTransportationPlan@ontario.ca; alena.grunwald@ontario.ca;

Re: ERO 019-2830 Draft Northern Ontario Transportation Plan

Dear Ministry,

The Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario (CFFO) is an Accredited Farm Organization representing the interests of over 4,000 farm families in Ontario who are called to the vocation of farming. CFFO policy promotes economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable farming, advocating that farmers receive fair return for their production and stewardship efforts.

“Connecting the North: A Draft Transportation Plan for Northern Ontario” acknowledges the importance of agriculture within this region of the province. Farm businesses rely on transportation infrastructure to provide access to farming inputs, allow movement of farm equipment between fields throughout the year, and to get goods to market. As rural residents, farm families are also impacted by transportation infrastructure and access to public transportation. In this region, often with significant distances between major settlement areas, the transportation system is vital for connecting rural residents with essential medical care, food and other supplies.

Getting People Moving and Connecting Communities

Currently highway and bus travel are the most affordable options for most people. Highways need to be constantly maintained and improved. The highway expansion projects discussed in the draft transportation plan, including widening Highway 69, Highway 11/17 and Highway 17 will all benefit the region.

Expanded bus service will be the most effective and timely way to improve access to public transportation options. While passenger rail service would be helpful, the timelines involved in achieving it do not promise quick improvements.

Air travel is a necessity for many in this region. It can also offer a faster alternative to land travel when conditions are treacherous and travel times are long. However, this is a much more expensive option, especially for travel within the region, as opposed to travel to Toronto, Winnipeg or other major cities from this region. Government support for this system of remote airports and smaller regional airports will be necessary to ensure they can continue to operate, especially under current COVID-19 conditions. Air travel providers need to cooperate to ensure routes are covered in the most efficient way possible.

Enabling Economic Opportunities

As this is primarily a resource producing region, transportation is vital for getting goods to markets. This region is also an important route for goods moving east and west across the country.

Although short term construction jobs and the resulting transportation infrastructure improvements will benefit the region, it is important to consider longer-term economic opportunities that can be supported in the region. Increasing local processing capacity in the region, for example, would offer more long-term employment.

Direct agricultural production requires further processing within reasonable distances, including abattoirs for all species raised in the region, as well as processing for milk and other perishable products. The time for travel of live animals and perishable goods depend on things like border closures, size of highways, road conditions, and so on. These types of economic opportunities need to be considered alongside the transportation system itself.

Keeping People Safe and Providing Reliable Transportation Options

Contractors need to consider the terrain and climate conditions as well as number of cars traveling on a road in their maintenance routines to keep roads safe. Slopes and roads that receive more significant precipitation all need to be taken into consideration by contractors maintaining road conditions for safe driving in winter.

The CFFO also supports the government efforts to improve vital rest stations along key routes. It is important to consider the need for rest stops for animals being transported long distances through this region as well as the needs for humans traveling along major routes.

Preparing for the Future

One of the key goals mentioned in this section is investments in improved broadband and cellular services. Improved internet and cellular service is an important foundation to help provide economic opportunities and access without travel to some types of essential services. In particular, this allows greater access to medical care, including for mental health support and other medical appointments that can be conducted by phone/video, where possible. This allows essential services to come to people where they live, rather than requiring travel which often comes with significant costs of money and time, as well as risk to safety in poor weather conditions.

Maintaining a Sustainable Transportation System

Impacts of COVID-19 highlight the weaknesses in our transportation system when crisis hits. Depending on the location within this region, often the largest centre to seek specialist medical attention or other needs may be closer in Manitoba or Quebec, outside of the province. It is important that these Ontario citizens are still able to access the health care they need at the closest possible centre, regardless if it is outside Ontario.

COVID-19 is by no means the first crisis to impact transportation in the region, especially for agriculture. Border closures, including the current closure of the border to the US, does not only impact transportation for humans wishing to travel out of the region. It also impacts the travel of animals and

goods into and out of the region, often adding significant time and distance to the trip. Considering the distances involved, greater effort should be made to allow access across borders to shorten travel times as much as possible for animals and goods traveling from the region.

Reliable Transportation Options for Remote and Far North Communities

Remote and far north communities form part of the market for farmers and processors in this region. Reliable transportation systems to bring necessary supplies like food to these communities need to be in place and consider connections with local supply chains.

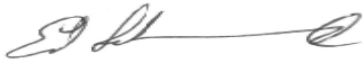
Conclusion

Transportation is vital for the farm businesses and farm families living and working in the northern region of Ontario. This region also connects Ontario, through rail, highways and ports, to the US and acts as a pivot point connecting eastern and western Canada, making it a key transportation hub for all of Canada.

With large settlements spaced over considerable distances in this region, transportation systems including road travel, rail and air travel must be maintained, despite the often high-costs, to ensure people's safety and access to necessary supplies and medical services. Whenever possible, alternatives such as improved internet, that can give access without necessitating travel, should be encouraged. Still, people and products need to be able to move within, into and out of the region as freely and safely as possible.

We appreciate your consideration of our concerns and comments.

Sincerely,



Ed Scharringa, President
Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario