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Highway controversy



Too late to challenge?—With preloading having recently started in South Delta, local MLA Vicki Huntington says it's not too late for the public to protest.

Rob Newell photo

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It was a line drawn by transportation planners on a map about four decades ago.

Today, it is a subject of simmering controversy as the physical impact on land set aside for construction of the South Fraser Perimeter Road begins to be apparent in South Delta as preloading begins.

It's a matter new Delta South independent MLA is

challenging, saying the truck route designed to lessen the load on local roads and accommodate an expected dramatic rise in container truck traffic in the coming years through Deltaport is being built in the wrong place and will consume far too much productive farmland.

On the other side of the subject is the local business community which says the \$1 billion asphalt artery—funded by the provincial and federal governments—is essential in moving the economy forward.

Wrong place, wrong route?

Huntington, who served as a Delta Councillor for 15 years, says she doesn't feel residents have a clear understanding of what is in store when it comes to how much impact the new highway's interchanges and overpasses will have on the landscape as it gobbles up acres of farmland.

The Gateway Program's—the quasi-government body overseeing the project—total of land required for construction is 222 acres.

Huntington puts that much higher, around 1,000 acres once other aspects—land adjacent to the interchanges and impact on sectioning off farmland—is taken into account.

But her overriding concern is that the project is ill-considered when there are alternative routes she considers are more viable and have less impact on farmland.

“Obviously something needs to be done to accommodate the increased truck traffic and the expansion of the port,” Huntington says. “But for most of us, however, is that it's (South Fraser Perimeter Road planning) not being done properly.”

Huntington contends the new highway, which when completed will link Deltaport with Highway 1, is being constructed with “maximum impact” on the communities it will pass through.

“There are alternatives that can be used,” she says, “We can upgrade River Road and take the traffic into Tilbury, the municipality is building River Way.”

Too late to change directions?

But is it too late to alter the course already set now work to prepare the soil for the road bed is being undertaken in South

Delta?

Huntington says no.

“Yes, they started some pre-load,” she says. “But it’s never too late to do the right thing. And for heaven’s sake, someone in this provincial government should take another look at the route they have chosen, re-design it before they have too gone far and do the right thing for once in South Delta.”

Huntington likened the situation to the upgrading of overhead power lines through portions of residential Tsawwassen when the public was clamouring for underground alternatives and different routes.

Whatever transpires, Huntington says the time is now for the public to raise their concerns.

“As long as the public takes an interest in this and recognizes there is still time to see change, even though the province has gone a long way down the road, if there is time to change it and do the right thing, hopefully somebody in this government will now listen to us. Don’t make the same mistakes they did with the power lines.

“That’s exactly what’s starting to happen here.”

Farmers’ concerns

Delta Farmers’ Institute administrator Robert Butler is doing what he can for farmers to make the best of the project he’d rather not see take place.

“If we had our druthers we’d sooner see this thing disappear off the map. We’ve made a decision to see what we could get,” he says.

The 90 hectares of land within the Agricultural Land Reserve to be used for the construction of the highway will impact 30 farming properties.

“It’s a lot of land, and we understand that,” says Butler. “But we understood clearly that the highway was going to go through from day one, and the issue was, well, if we simply say no all the time what are we going to get? Well, nothing.”

The lines of communication between the farmers’ institute and the province have been open since 2004.

“Recognizing that it will require some agricultural land, some

of which is currently farmed, we've committed to a \$28 million agricultural enhancement strategy," says B.C. Gateway director of planning and community relations Pam Ryan.

The main aspect of the mitigation package is an irrigation and drainage system which Ryan says will service 15,000 acres of Delta farmland including an additional 5,000 acres currently without access.

"If it's designed properly it will increase the capacity of fresh water available to farmers," says Butler.

The current gravity-flow irrigation system only allows farmers to access fresh water at high tide—an improved irrigation system would enable farmers to choose when they want to water their fields.

Improved access for farming vehicles via overpasses and service roads are next on the Delta Farmers Institute's list, such as an extension of Burns Drive north of Highway 99 connecting 88th St. to 72nd St.

"There were a lot of previous highway initiatives that had come through here such as Highway 17, Highway 99, where there was absolutely no mitigation for farmers. We've tried to correct some of the things not done right the first time," says Butler.

Other minor requests such as vehicle-activated lights so farm vehicles can more easily turn on to Ladner Trunk Road have not been granted, but Butler says negotiations between the farmers and the province are ongoing while detailed design planning continues.

"We're not finished pressing government but we're focussing mostly on the bigger ones," he says. "Some of these others cost Delta long term maintenance costs, and they might not be amenable to them."

So far, Butler is aware of only one farmer who will be put out of business as a result of the highway, a small cranberry producer who leases municipal land for his farm in North Delta.

Highway of benefits?

On the other side of the issue, the local business community sees the potential benefits the new highway will bring.

Greg Muirhead, president of the Delta Chamber of Commerce says the new highway has to be a win-win situation for both local business and residents.

“When you look at port expansion, we need the connection,” Muirhead says. “It’s going to get a lot of truck traffic out of Ladner.”

What’s the alternative?

“If you think that we’re not going to be growing and more traffic is not going to be coming through, it’s like sticking your head in the sand,” Muirhead adds. “We should be happy that it’s here and take advantage of it.”

Henri Legal, senior director of operations for Maersk Distribution in Delta which handles a good portion of container traffic through Deltaport, says truck container growth is inevitable, but that does not give the green to the industry run roughshod over local concerns.

Legal says he praises the work done by opposition groups to keep Gateway officials aware of issues surrounding the community and environment.

“All the power to them, because they force us to pay attention to those concerns. But I honestly think it’s (SFPR) in the right place.

“They (Gateway) did the right thing, a lot of good research of where the best route should be. It certainly takes away traffic from areas that need relief right now,” Legal says.

Common ground

In theory, Huntington agrees.

“Yes, we need to move the trucks through Delta efficiently and effectively. And yes we need to get them into Tilbury, but there are ways to do that and not gobble up as much land.

“Yes, you can build this road. Yes, we know we need it. Yes, there is an alternative route that would do far less damage to Delta.”

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