

# Peachlanders wonder if bypass will get fair shake

Ron Seymour | Posted: Thursday, January 14, 2016 9:44 pm

Strong support for a bypass was tempered by skepticism about whether the government will really consider the hoped-for transportation alternative during a meeting Wednesday of 350 Peachlanders.

The vast majority of people who packed into the community centre picked up green cards on their way in, expressing their support for a bypass to take Highway 97 traffic around the town.

But some of the first questions fielded by Ministry of Transportation representatives who hosted the unprecedented meeting related to the purposefulness of the public consultation process, with several people suggesting the ministry would ultimately four-lane the existing highway rather than build a bypass.

“Are we just going to be thrown to the wolves?” resident Jeff McDougal asked, after noting Peachland has only 5,000 people and might be a small factor in the ministry’s overall setting of Okanagan and provincial highway priorities.

“Sometimes I think, and maybe you feel the same way, that there is a preferred option or real decision that’s already been made,” Norm Boyer told the crowd, wondering if there was any point in so many people having turned out for Wednesday night’s meeting.

Despite their doubts, however, both Boyer and McDougal put their names forward to serve on a public committee that will examine all issues surrounding the decision Victoria will eventually have to make on whether to widen the existing highway or build a bypass.

McDougal, a construction estimator by trade, was voted into the position by the big crowd.

The ministry-led analysis — which will also involve representation from the trucking industry, chamber of commerce, First Nations, environmental groups and BC Transit — is expected to produce a recommendation sometime in 2017 on whether to go with four-laning or a bypass.

A 17-kilometre stretch of Highway 97 through Peachland is the last remaining two-lane section from south of Penticton to north of Vernon. Given its position more or less in the middle of the valley, it’s curious the Peachland portion hasn’t changed substantially in decades.

Probably most Peachlanders have long accepted the inevitability, if not the desirability, of the existing highway being doubled in width.

They only had to look up to Westbank to see the harmful effects of a full-size highway through the middle of a community — creation of a car-oriented commercial strip with gas stations, tire shops and strip malls with big parking lots, and a horribly unfriendly walking environment.

But even as a Peachlander myself, when I first heard years ago there was a group touting a bypass option, I thought they must be quite a daft bunch. The idea the government would green-light a costly bypass around such a small town struck me as ludicrously unlikely given what must surely be much higher transportation priorities elsewhere in the province.

But then Christy Clark got herself elected in West Kelowna. And the premier has jump-started discussion on a second Okanagan Lake crossing, bringing that project from being a half-century away to sometime in the 2020s.

In Kelowna, the second bridge would almost certainly link to the downtown north end, tying into Clement Avenue, which will eventually parallel Highway 97. On the Westside, the new bridge would surely connect with a new West Kelowna bypass, built in the hills west of the city.

And that bypass would branch off the Okanagan Connector about five kilometres up from the Highway 97 interchange, roughly where Peachland bypass proponents think their hoped-for road could tie into the Connector.

Right now, the idea of driving a bit up the Connector to go around Peachland seems counterintuitive to most people's driving preferences to head in as straight a direction as possible. But a decade or so from now, the bypass would make perfect sense as an integral link in a smooth-flowing new Highway 97 that skirts all of Peachland, all of West Kelowna, and runs with limited traffic lights through much of Kelowna.

Bypass advocates, who include engineers and people with road-building experience, say the 20-km new route might cost \$160 million compared to \$140 million for widening the existing 16-km two-lane highway. The official study now underway by the ministry will determine the accuracy of these figures.

In response to skepticism the government will seriously consider the bypass, consultant Jack Stuempel promised the alternative route would be thoroughly and fairly evaluated in terms of its efficiency, cost and environmental impact, among other measurements.

"I would like to assure you that, no, this process (of public consultation) is not a waste of time," Stuempel said.

So perhaps Peachland's future was foreshadowed in the fall of 2008, when a massive rock slide forced the closure of Highway 97 at Summerland. Suddenly, all the through traffic in Peachland was gone, and the town was as quiet and peaceful as it's ever been.

It was a blissful interlude, Peachlanders hope, that one day comes back and stays forever.

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