



At the Crossroads

Front-line workers in the Ministry of Transportation believe a major change in direction is urgently needed

B.C.'s union!

B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union



Executive Summary

Background

The BCGEU represents members in the Ministry of Transportation who do the planning, design, construction, inspection, maintenance and administration of our transportation system. The BCGEU also represents members who work for the private companies that are contracted by the government to perform maintenance of provincial roads and bridges.

The Ministry of Transportation is one of the oldest public sector organizations in the province with roots dating to 1854. The ministry plays a critical role in our province. The roads, bridges and transportation infrastructure managed by the ministry link us to family, neighbours and communities, and are essential to our trade-oriented provincial economy.

The challenge we face

Today, our transportation system is at a crossroads. More than a decade of declining budgets, staff cuts and a growing population spell trouble. Any further delay in addressing our transportation requirements will cause costs to escalate exponentially.

The average age of the highway surfaces in B.C. is now 15 years. The industry calculates that rehabilitation of a 12-year-old highway costs \$60,000 per kilometre. It costs five times as much to rehabilitate an 18-year-old highway – \$300,000 per kilometre. At 24 years the cost reaches \$1 million per kilometre.

The cuts to our transportation system have been deep. Transportation spending today is 4.1% lower than it was in fiscal 1997/98. It is the only budget category to have declined in this time

frame. Cuts to front line staff have been dramatic. Since 1995 the ministry has lost more than 1,200 planners, designers, inspectors, administrators and other key workers.

The survey

To gauge the impact of these cuts in spending and staff, the BCGEU conducted a survey of the men and women who work in the Ministry of Transportation. The survey was conducted in May and June. Nearly 600 members took the time and the opportunity to respond.

The survey explores three key areas. It measures the opinion of front-line workers on:

- How well the ministry is positioned to achieve its strategic plans and goals in the opinion of those who are charged with carrying out the plans.
- The top trends likely to impact the ministry's work, and B.C.'s transportation system, in the coming years.
- Workplace issues that have been raised at union meetings and in other forums by BCGEU members employed in the ministry.

Key findings

- 72% say the shrinking transportation dollar is the major concern facing the provincial highways system. Investments have not kept pace with population growth and the growing number of roads that need to be maintained and repaired.
- Only just over half – 56 % – say the ministry adequately inspects roads and bridges to keep them safe for drivers and to protect their structural integrity.
- Nearly three quarters of workers

*WORKERS SAY:
"Rather than getting funding to make good roads, we are constantly making roads to fit the budget."*

*WORKERS SAY:
"What looks
good is only on
paper."*

report that the ministry does not provide enough operational funding for them to do their jobs effectively.

- 91% disagree with the assertion that privatization of highway and bridge maintenance in the 1980s has improved the quality of our transportation system.

- Close to 90% say ministry planning for succession as employees retire is not adequate.

- 82% say the ministry does not provide sufficient funding for the training needed to stay up to date and improve productivity.

- Close to 70% state that government decisions about highways programs have caused a deterioration in the quality of and access to corporate data needed to do the work.

- Morale is low and dropping. An overwhelming 86% of ministry employ-

ees say morale has declined since 1995. Only 2% say morale has improved.

Conclusion

An overwhelming majority of front-line workers believe the Ministry of Transportation is headed down the wrong road and must change direction. Years of budget and staff cuts are affecting service to the travelling public. Any delay in re-examining the ministry's direction will cost the taxpayers more in future as costs escalate. Investing in our road system is the right thing to do from both an economic and safety perspective.

We urge the new government to take a fresh look at B.C.'s transportation needs and reverse the spending cuts which have put our highway infrastructure at risk.

Introduction

Public service workers have two unique roles to perform for the public. First, public service workers need to carry out their day to day duties for their employer, the government of B.C. Their second duty is to the public. Public service workers have a responsibility to identify issues and concerns about the services they are mandated to

provide as well as the infrastructure they plan for and maintain.

This report documents the views and first-hand opinions of public service workers employed in the Ministry of Transportation who believe it is our duty to inform the public about the critical issues that face our provincial transportation system.

*WORKERS SAY:
“We are at a critical point. I feel we are fast losing the ability to take care of the road network that is entrusted to us.”*

The Ministry of Transportation

The Ministry of Transportation is one of the oldest provincial public service organizations in the province. The ministry describes its history as follows:

“The ministry’s origins date back to 1854 when three road commissioners were appointed to oversee spending on the construction of roads in the colony. The first wagon road built was Craigflower Road connecting farms in the area of Fort Victoria. Later attention turned to the mainland where early road building was closely linked to the gold rushes.

“The commission became the Department of Lands and Works in 1858. It was headed by a chief commissioner, whose responsibilities included, among other things, to locate, construct and maintain highways and bridges in what was then still a Crown colony but which became a province in 1871 when it entered confederation with the rest of Canada.

“In 1908, the department changed to

the Department of Public Works (including highways). A separate Ministry of Highways didn’t come into being until 1954. Since 1858, the provincial highway program has been headed by 47 chief commissioners or ministers.”

Today, the ministry is responsible for planning, developing and maintaining the provincial highway system. In June of 2001, the Honourable Judith Reid was appointed as minister and became the 48th leader charged with responsibility for a re-named Ministry of Transportation. The ministry has the following general responsibilities:

- Highway construction and maintenance.
- Provincial highway policy and programs.
- Transportation planning and policy.
- Applications of the Motor Vehicle Act and the Motor Carrier Commission Act.
- Superintendent of Motor Vehicles.

The situation today

“Highways are critical for Canada’s competitiveness, its economic performance, productivity and trade.”

– B.C. Automobile Association

The new government and the new minister have inherited some difficult problems. Many people take highways for granted. That can be a costly mistake.

B.C. Government and Service Employees’ Union members who work in the Ministry of Transportation take pride in the work they do to help British Columbians travel safely and transport their goods to market as efficiently as possible. However, budget and staff cuts have caused serious concerns about the transportation service and infrastructure.

Beginning in late 1996, the provincial government imposed dramatic cuts to the budgets and staff of the Ministry of Transportation. This is reflected in the number of BCGEU members employed in the ministry. Between April, 1995

and April, 2001 a total of 1,233 workers were cut or transferred from ministry payrolls.

tation is the only spending category that has been reduced in this timeframe.

Front-line workers are not alone in their opinion that our transportation system needs a change in direction. The 700,000 member B.C. Automobile Association, in their 2001 brief to the provincial government, had this blunt assessment:

“Highways are critical for Canada’s competitiveness, its economic performance, productivity and trade. Inferior roads directly affect Canadian businesses. Inferior roads directly contribute to unacceptable levels of fatalities and injuries among our citizens...”

“The simple fact is that Canadian roadways haven’t kept up with the growth of population, our urbanization and the growth in vehicle travel. Investment in the National Highway System will stimulate economic development and productivity. The study by federal and provincial transport ministers showed that bringing the National Highway System up to standard would likely generate as much as \$2 billion in the form of accelerated productivity growth in Canada, to say nothing of the saving of as many as 247 lives each year and the prevention of up to 16,000 injuries.”

And the ministry itself recognizes the challenges. Ministry briefing materials circulated to staff in July, 2001, underlined the problems created by reduced funding.

“In the current year, operating and capital funding are lower than in previous years, and the ministry plans to respond in part by reducing staff levels. This will create stresses and delays as responsibility for some programs and initiatives is transferred to the people

Front-line workers in the Ministry of Transportation and Highways	
1995	3,233
1996	3,145
1997	2,634
1998	2,391
1999	2,053
2000	2,075
2001	2,000

Source: BCGEU Membership Records for April of each year

who remain in the ministry or to temporary staff. The implications of lower capital funding will be felt over time. One important implication of reduced expansion funding is that it may threaten the province's ability to deliver on commitments made to regional and local governments. Reduced capital

funding may also call into question the ability of the ministry to hold the line on the condition of main roads and bridges, and it will make planning the future of the side road network, much of which is in poor condition, more difficult."

*WORKERS SAY:
"The people of
British Columbia
deserve better."*

The Survey

This survey follows an earlier study of the state of B.C.'s highways. In 1998, the BCGEU published the research report, *"Crossroads: The Road to Ruin? The Report of the BCGEU Highways, Road and Bridge Review Team."* This report documented the alarming deterioration of our highway infrastructure based in part on the perspective of highway road and bridge maintenance workers employed by private sector contractors. Dozens of municipal councils endorsed the report's 10-point action plan to rebuild our provincial highway system.

Unfortunately, the provincial government failed to act on the recommendations and instead continued to cut highway expenditures and staff.

In response to members who contacted the union with growing concerns about the impact of these cuts, the BCGEU conducted a survey of workers in the Ministry of Transportation. The survey was sponsored by the three BCGEU Components who represent the workers in this ministry — Component 6, Social Educational and Health Services; Component 12, Administrative Services and Component 20, Environment, Technical and Operational.

Issues covered in the questionnaire

Front-line BCGEU members from the Ministry of Transportation helped design the survey questionnaire, and identified three broad areas to be explored.

First, we asked members to evaluate how the ministry is meeting its own goals. In early 2001, the ministry updated its strategic and performance plans. The ministry documents state that these plans "outline the Ministry's goals, objectives and strategies for ensuring that our service to the public and industry is cost-effective and efficient."

The union's survey asked the workers who are charged with carrying out these plans how well the ministry is positioned to meet its goals.

Second, we reviewed the top trends likely to impact the ministry's work in coming years. These trends are derived from an "environmental scan" prepared by the ministry.

And finally we examined workplace issues that have been raised at union meetings and in other forums by BCGEU members employed in the ministry.

In total, we asked members to consider 49 specific questions. In addition, we provided the opportunity for an

open-ended response to allow members to report on specific areas of concern or to elaborate on items raised in the survey.

Methodology

The survey was mailed to members who were asked to return the completed survey in a postage-paid envelope or via facsimile. They were also given the opportunity to complete the survey on-line through the union website. Members were asked to answer only those questions that related to their personal experiences in the ministry.

The survey was in the field for five weeks between the first of May to the first week of June, 2001.

More than 600 BCGEU members participated in the survey. In other words, about 30 percent of the 2,000 people who work for the ministry took the time to respond.

This is an exceptional rate of return for this type of survey instrument. A random sample survey (as opposed to a representative sample survey) is generally considered statistically valid if 10 percent of the group responds. This response rate is three times that level.

*WORKERS SAY:
"The ministry
seems to have
lost its direction
in providing for
the
transportation
needs of the
people."*

RESULTS

The challenges and road ahead

1. Major ministry trends

Members provided clear direction in their ranking of the importance of the top trends affecting transportation as identified by the ministry.

By a 72% majority, members identified the shrinking transportation dollar as the major concern facing the provincial highways system. This reflects the concern that government investments have not kept pace with population

growth nor with the growth in the road inventory that needs to be maintained and repaired.

Nearly 60% of members responding also identified access to skilled human resources as the major issue facing the ministry. A similar number identified the constraints imposed by past infrastructure decisions as the major concern.

2. Operational issues

a) Funding

Members were asked four questions on the change from single funding to partnering with the B.C. Transportation Financing Authority, ICBC etc.

70% of respondents said these funding changes have not resulted in an improved focus on the development, rehabilitation or improvement of the

roadways.

On the other hand, 83% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that these changes have increased administrative duties. Approximately 73% agreed or strongly agreed that the changes have created a separation of responsibility or a sense of loss of ownership.

b) Contract management and privatization

This section explored how privatization has affected highway and bridge maintenance. It also rated the effectiveness of monitoring and enforcement of contract specifications.

91% of front-line workers disagree that privatization of highway and bridge maintenance has improved the quality of our transportation system.

Only just over half – 56 % – say that the ministry adequately inspects roads and bridges to keep them safe for drivers and to protect their structural integrity.

60% say the ministry does not adequately monitor and inspect the work of highway and bridge maintenance contractors to ensure compliance with contract specifications. And 39% say the ministry does not perform adequate random audits to ensure contractors are in compliance with financial and service deliver requirements.

72% percent stated management of the ministry does not provide clear direction for enforcement of the conditions of maintenance contracts.

*WORKERS SAY:
“During my travels throughout the province I have noticed a significant decline in the condition of the infrastructure as well as highway maintenance in general. All you have to do is open your eyes.”*

56% say that, compared to past practice, non-compliance with ministry standards is now harder to establish. And 64% said that enforcement is not effective, even if non-compliance has

been established.

And finally, 60% of respondents do not believe ministry culverts and ditches are well maintained.

*WORKERS SAY:
“The sad part is the taxpayer will be the one who eventually pays the price for the substandard and non-existent highways.”*

c) Development approvals

The transportation ministry plays a role in developments and access requests that affect the provincial highway system.

41% reported that the ministry does not do adequate checks on development approvals and access requests.

Compared to 1995, 31% felt there was more potential for abuse in the development approval process; only 13% say there is less potential for abuse. The remaining 56% saw no change.

Most indicated they felt that politics or economics unduly influence development approvals – 55% disagreed with the test statement that development approvals are based more on standards and policy than politics or economics. Almost half – 46% of respondents – say that ministry policy and practice does not adequately balance highway safety and efficiency with access management and development approvals.

d) Staffing, funding and workplace issues

Nearly three quarters of members reported that the ministry does not provide enough operational funding for them to do their jobs effectively. Over 80% said that staffing levels have declined since 1995. As a result of these cuts, more than 60% of members said service is delayed to clients, while 33% said that service is no longer provided.

The operational and business decisions that were forced on the ministry as a result of these cuts have had a negative effect on productivity, said 77% of respondents.

Morale is very low. When people are trying to do a good job, but are not allowed to do so because of government decisions, it affects the entire workplace.

An overwhelming 86% of ministry employees say morale has declined since 1995. Only 2% say morale has improved.

Planning for future succession needs as older workers retire is a major issue, but close to 90% of respondents do not believe ministry planning is adequate in this area. As well, 82% say the ministry does not provide sufficient funding for training for either career development or productivity improvement.

Close to 70% state that government decisions about highways programs have caused a deterioration in the quality of and access to corporate data they need to do their work.

3. Contracting and alternative project delivery

The survey explored a number of alternative service delivery methods tried by the ministry in recent years.

Front-line workers say the design-build approach — where contractors both design and build a project, as opposed to building it to Ministry of Transportation specifications and design — is often more expensive, with less public control of the outcome.

81% say design-build project delivery has failed to achieve any savings for taxpayers. 85% say there's no improvement in completion time. Nearly 75% say design-build fails to offer any improvements in risk management. However, 81% say it does increase administrative duties. 72% say that final responsibility for design-build projects remains with taxpayers. And 81% say claims have not decreased.

The use of outcome-based End Product Specifications for paving, as opposed to specific requirements and on-site monitoring, has not produced any savings for taxpayers according to three-quarters of respondents. 72% say the use

of EPS has not improved control or management of risk. 78% say EPS has increased administrative duties. 77% say there are no fewer claims with the use of EPS compared to traditional paving contracts.

The move to consultant design has failed to save taxpayers a penny in design cost according to 90% of respondents. And 85% say the move to consultant design has not improved the control and management of risk factors. 84% say it has created additional administrative duties. 88% percent say the number of construction claims is the same or more compared to in-house design.

The Victoria Materials Testing Laboratory was closed in 1996 because of budget cuts.

A total of 58% of respondents say this closure has had an impact on the quality assurance program. 52% say it has affected testing and calibration of equipment and 53% believe it has negatively affected the bridge deck condition rating program.

*WORKERS SAY:
“The ministry has not tried to train the personnel needed to replace retired employees.”*

4. Ministry strategic plan

In this section, employees evaluated how well the ministry is doing in meeting its own goals as identified in its strategic plan. The ministry received positive marks in four categories, and negative marks in five others.

The ministry is fully or partially meeting its stated goals

Environmental Stewardship – implements sound environmental practices in all ministry programs 77% agree

Safety – promotes the safe movement of people and goods, and reduces the number of accidents on the highway system 67% agree

Positive First Nations Relations – promotes positive relations with First Nations 64% agree

Improves the provincial highway infrastructure through the implementation of major capital projects 62% agree

Promotes employee involvement in their work environments 49% agree

WORKERS SAY:
“Morale at my worksite continues to drop. I thought it had reached its lowest possible point several years ago.”

Economic and Social Well Being – the ministry is providing an efficient and sustainable transportation system that will protect and create jobs, promote economic development, and ensure access to facilities and markets 48% agree

Effective Planning and Policy Development – the transportation ministry implements consistent, coordinated and effective highways planning and policy

development 48% agree

Ensures that priority investments are based on the life cycle of the highway, bridge or other asset 41% agree

Implementing recruitment activities (e.g. outreach recruiting) that focus on reaching the ministry’s employment equity goals and attracting and retaining qualified and productive staff 41% agree

5. Demographics

a) Response by ministry program area

Seventy-seven percent of respondents work in the Highways Operations Department.

This department is responsible for delivering road maintenance, rehabilitation, minor capital and development approval programs. It also has responsibility for fresh-water ferry services on 17 routes. Through its three headquarters branches, it establishes standards and provides expert advice in the areas of engineering, construction, maintenance, claims resolution and aboriginal relations.

Fourteen percent work in the Planning and Major Projects Department.

This department is responsible for planning the highway system and implementing large-scale capital projects. It is also responsible for leading the improvement of project management practices within the ministry and for coordinating and leading land acquisition policies and procedures.

Seven percent work in the Management Services and Motor Vehicles Department.

This department is responsible for supporting the core business activities of the ministry through the provision of internal services, including finance, administration, human resources, information services, freedom of information and accountability. It includes the Office of the Superintendent of Motor Vehicles, which oversees driver medical reviews and driver improvement programs, and hears appeals of administrative decisions of ICBC relating to motor-vehicle-sector issues, notably commercial driving schools and designated inspection facilities.

Less than 1% of respondents work in the Corporate Policy and Planning Branch or the Communications Branch. The Corporate Policy and Planning Branch leads the development and coordination of initiatives to achieve government policy priorities, including corporate-level planning. The Communications Branch provides communications guidance, counsel and support to the minister and ministry executive, as well as other areas of the ministry.

b) Response by geographic location and employment status

Most respondents – 43% – work in the ministry headquarters in Victoria. Thirty-three percent work at the regional or district level. Sixteen percent work in a project office.

The vast majority of members who responded are regular employees – 97%. Three percent are auxiliary or temporary employees.

The opinions expressed in this survey are based on long experience. Seventy-

three percent of respondents have worked for the ministry for more than 10 years.

The number of years the respondents have worked in the Ministry of Transportation and Highways breaks out as follows:

Less than 10 years	27%
11 to 20 years	31%
21 to 30 years	33%
More than 30 years	9%

c) Response by BCGEU component

Fifty-four percent of respondents are members of the BCGEU's Environmental, Technical and Operational services component. This component represents ministry employees who provide engineering support and perform inspectional duties at the technical level, as well as workers who protect natural resources and safeguard the environment. These positions normally require advanced technical knowledge.

Specific classifications include: bridgeworker, carpenter, communication technician, deck-hand, electrician, electrician's helper, engineering aide, flag person, foremen, general tradesperson, labourer, machine operator, marine engineer, marine mate, marine captain, mechanic's assistant and mechanic, oiler, control tower operator, painter, patrolman corporal, photo arts technician, photographic technician, planning officer, printing operator, radio operator, rock scaler, safety officer, science officer, scientific/technical officer, mechanics superintendent, technical assistant, technical

enforcement officer, terminal attendant, transport inspecting engineer and yardworker.

Forty-two percent of respondents are members of the Administrative Services component. This component represents members who provide front-line administrative and support services.

Specific classifications include: administrative officer, road and bridge area manager, clerk, financial officer, postal clerk, clerk stenographer, office assistant, data processing operator, radio, teletype and switchboard operators, stationery clerk and stockworker.

Three percent of respondents are members of the Social, Educational and Health Services component. This component represents members who work in social, educational, information technology, research, and associated direct technical support functions.

Specific classifications include: economist, communications officers, computer programmers and systems analysts.

*WORKERS SAY:
"Not all traffic problems can be solved by transit. A serious look needs to be taken at where the ministry is going."*

Conclusion

Our transportation system is at a crossroad. And an overwhelming majority of front-line workers believe the Ministry of Transportation is headed in the wrong direction.

As the B.C. Automobile Association points out, highways are critical for our competitiveness, our economic performance, productivity and trade. Inferior roads directly affect B.C.'s and Canada's businesses. Inferior roads directly contribute to unacceptable levels of injury and death.

For more than a decade, governments have cut the ministry budget and staff, while a growing population has placed increasing demands on our ageing highway system. Such cuts may have achieved short-term budget savings, but only at the price of much higher costs in years to come. When it comes to highways, delay is costly.

The average age of B.C.'s highway surfaces is 15 years. The industry calculates that rehabilitation of a 12-year-old highway costs \$60,000 per kilometre. It costs *five times* as much to rehabilitate an 18-year-old highway – \$300,000 per

kilometre. At 24 years, the cost reaches \$1 million per kilometre.

Despite this reality of escalating costs, governments have inflicted deep cuts to our transportation system. Transportation spending today is 4.1% lower than it was in fiscal 1997/98. It is the only budget category to have declined in this time frame. The cuts to front-line staff have been dramatic. Since 1995 the ministry has lost more than 1,200 planners, designers, inspectors, administrators and other key workers.

It is clear that further delay in re-examining the ministry's direction will cost the taxpayers more in future as roads deteriorate and costs increase. Acting now to restore investments in our road system is the right thing to do from both an economic and safety perspective.

We urge the new government to take a fresh look at B.C.'s transportation needs. We urge the government to reverse the spending cuts which have put our highway infrastructure at risk. Unless there is a change in direction in the Ministry of Transportation, British Columbians will be paying more for less.

