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*"Where Do We Go From Here?" is a feature service of the Prairie Centre.*

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# WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

## Fixing the Holes September 20, 2006

A long while ago in a different time and place Paul McCartney sang of "Fixing the hole where the rain comes in." It is a prudent activity to stop the roof leaking and most of us understand that it is cheaper to replace the shingles on the roof when they start to leak than to stand idly by while the rain starts to rot the roof joists and eventually ruin the furniture inside the house.

A few thousand dollars on new shingles every decade is much cheaper than the structural repair of the roof beams and buying new furniture for the house. As individuals we understand and practice this logic each day.

Why is it then that governments don't understand and practice exactly the same logic when managing our road system? Provincial highways are deteriorating. Maintenance and repair expenditures have not kept pace with the rate of road decay.

The provincial department of Highways & Transportation acknowledged in their 2003/4 Annual Report that "...pavements on the principal system are aging faster than they are being rehabilitated." For years capital and maintenance spending has steadily declined. At present rates of fixing the roads it will take over sixty years before they can restore the roads to their design specifications.

It is poor public management and poor public policy that allows the roads to continue their steady decline in quality. For years now real inflation adjusted public spending on roads has consistently fallen. Potholes and poor driving surfaces are now common throughout the province in all seasons.

This policy of benign roads neglect, presumably introduced to save money, actually increases the costs

of road maintenance and rehabilitation to taxpayers. It is five times more expensive to rebuild a road once its foundations are beyond repair than to undertake earlier and timely road maintenance.

Today nearly forty percent of all provincial roads have passed their effective shelf life – or the date on which the road should be replaced. On the basis of statistics released last year the province identified 65% (over half) of its thin membrane surface roads and 47% (nearly half) of its gravel roads not meeting its own criteria for "good" roads.

Deferring road spending to some future date may be seen as a saving to government, but in reality it is a transfer of costs to individuals who pick up the real costs of bad roads in increased expenditures on tires, fuel consumption, wheel alignments, cracked windshields and increased insurance premiums.

The sum of these increased costs for individuals far exceeds any savings that may be made by government. This insidious shift in the social contract on roads spending is costing all Saskatchewan drivers money while governments divert the funds they collect from the roads in sales and fuel taxes into other activities.

Equally important, Saskatchewan's third world road system is now a deterrent to business and tourism. In many parts of the province where primary highway weights are not allowed, poor roads are a deterrent to investment and economic development because heavy vehicles cannot legally travel on the roads. Entrepreneurs considering investment in the province are asked by the Provincial government to consider paying for any new roads they may require. Pothole stories have now become a part of the legend

that Saskatchewan tourists take away from the province. As responsible individuals we understand the importance of maintaining our assets. Periodically we replace the shingles on the roof and paint the windows and the siding on the house. Good public policy on roads would change the practices of recent years and establish a level of spending to maintain and improve the quality of the provincial highway asset base.

Politicians and senior bureaucrats in charge of these assets must realize their performance has been lacking. Saskatchewan used to be a leader in transportation in Canada. Today, roads in many parts of the province are a disgrace. The lessons of economic development from around the world have shown that physical infrastructure, including roads, is an essential foundation for sustainable economic development and change.

One can only conclude that the low priority for provincial roads maintenance is a symbol that governments either do not understand the process of economic development or do not wish to develop their economy.

Good public policy would not allow these policies to continue. Good public policy would assume responsibility for maintaining and improving our public assets.

Fixing the holes is good public policy.

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*For more information on the State of Roads in Saskatchewan contact the Saskatchewan Road Builders and Heavy Construction Association for a copy of Move On Saskatchewan.  
Ph: (306)-586-1805 or  
visit their website <http://www.rbhca.sk.ca>*