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The "Cobequid Impasse"

What's Come to Pass

by Janet Maybee

On December 1, 1997, the new toll highway through the Cobequid Pass in northern Nova Scotia officially opened. Within hours it was closed, as high winds and drifting snow made it impossible for trucks to climb its steep grades. Some travellers were stranded in snowdrifts for as much as twelve hours. Long-time residents of the area, though sorry for the predicament of hapless drivers, weren't slow to remark, "Told you so."

Indeed they had, in December, 1992, during four days of environmental hearings at the Great Village Masonic Hall. People who had spent their whole lives in the area warned of the extreme weather hazards and safety concerns related to the proposed western route through remote wilderness. At the same time, business and community leaders begged that the highway be routed closer to the North Shore villages of Tatamagouche, Malagash, Wallace, and Pugwash, where it could actually bring benefits to human settlements ("Isn't that what 'infrastructure' means?" they asked), instead of simply being a nuisance to moose in the Cobequid Mountains.

But the only ones to get a real hearing were the proponents of "public-private partnership," and they urged the government to give responsibility for construction and operation of the highway to the private sector. Atlantic Highways Corporation, the consortium chosen to build the road, bulldozed through local wisdom, and soon Nova Scotia could brag of being the only Canadian province with a cover charge: toll booths on the Trans-Canada Highway.

In its first year of operation, the toll road has become known locally as the "Cobequid Impasse," thanks to numerous closures for storms, and for repairs to crumbling pavement. Mercifully, there have been no fatal accidents thus far, but truckers, compelled by law to take the route and pay the toll, are not happy. In order to capture more toll-booth income, Atlantic Highways persuaded the province to ban trucks from the old highway. Now, there's even talk of a private police force to patrol the Wentworth Valley and nab truckers who try to sneak by on the old road.

Now that the dust has had a year to settle, what has been the impact on communities in this part of Nova Scotia? Certainly, people in Amherst feel disconnected from the rest of the province, but it's the small rural and coastal communities of the North Shore that are really struggling for survival.

The new highway is a mixed blessing, according to Cathy Redmond, who lives on the edge of the old road through Wentworth. Her children can now wait without fear for the school bus at the end of the driveway, and the sudden quiet is a delight to Cathy: "For the first time in twenty years of living here," she says, "I can get up in the morning and hear the birds singing."

But it's much too quiet for business owners along the former main road to Montreal. Many enterprises have packed it in. The Lady Wentworth Irving station and restaurant left a huge gap in the local economy when it closed, taking away 38 jobs. Several of the staff were able to find work at another Irving in Enfield, but it's a long way to commute. Cathy Redmond worries that some families will eventually have to move away, and, if the number of students attending the local school drops much lower, it could be closed.

There's only one grocery store left in Wentworth, and the community had to fight to keep a single bus running through the Valley daily. Redmond's latest battle is with the provincial Department of Transportation, whose peculiar logic has dictated the lowering of the speed limit to a snail's-pace 70 km/h on a highway that is now

virtually deserted: it was 90 km/h when traffic was at full roar. Safety is clearly not the issue here: rather, it's a secret deal the province made with Atlantic Highways that guarantees at least a 30-km/h difference between the new route and the old, thus further discouraging people from taking the old, toll-free route. Redmond suspects that a similar motive is behind a frustrating lack of clear signage that would direct tourists through the Wentworth Valley, and to North Shore destinations: "People have gone by before they know it," she laments.

Closer to Truro is the Glenholme Loop, where business owners are still hoping to develop a promised major service and rest centre. Even before the toll road opened, Gary Staples announced that he would be shutting down his restaurant and Esso station because he expected traffic to disappear. He later reconsidered on the gas station and is now seeing a slow recovery, especially on stormy days when trucks huddle at his station. (The Cobequid Pass has no rest area or safe pull-over areas on its entire 45-kilometre length.) But the Irving station across the road from Staples' operation has vanished, and the lot has been grassed over.

The Millens, who run a farm market called The Strawberry Man, calculate that their trade was down 30 to 40 percent last year. Mrs. Millen says signs on the new road confuse people who don't know the area and can't figure out where to get off. This problem has turned into a boon for the Masstown Market, which is right at the end of the off-ramp at Exit 12: baffled tourists stop to ask directions, then stay to buy something. Marketeer Eric Jennings has offered to donate land on his corner for a proposed Visitor Information Centre, if the province will help build it.

Signage has also been the big issue for Gerald Langille and his neighbours over in Wallace. A Cumberland County councillor, Langille relates incidents ranging from disappointing to potentially tragic over the past year, as he has struggled to secure even one sign bearing his community's name somewhere on the highway. "People have missed funerals because they can't find the turn-off," he notes ruefully. Of greater concern are health risks. One night, an oxygen unit urgently needed in Wallace was to come from the Annapolis Valley: it wound up in Thompson Station, at the far end of the toll road. (Luckily, the delay wasn't fatal for an elderly Wallace woman.) In mid-January, Langille received word from the Department of Transportation that new signs have been approved. It's the first piece of good news for Wallace after a lean year, and residents hope some of the missing tourism traffic will find its way back.

Another North Shore village, Tatamagouche, has also been suffering tourism withdrawal symptoms. While the province was boasting of big gains in tourism numbers last summer, North Shore motels and gift shops were experiencing a general decline. James Le-fresne, who runs the unique Train Station Inn in Tatamagouche (imagine a caboose with a Jacuzzi!), blames the combination of the new toll highway and the fixed link to Prince Edward Island. Traffic in both directions is diverted from the communities of the North Shore.

George Buckler, who chairs the Tatamagouche Village Commission, reckons that there's too much traffic, of the wrong sort, on the village's narrow, friendly main street. Too many big trucks are taking the Sunrise Trail, avoiding the tolls and leaving potholes behind, Buckler contends.

Hans Jost, who makes international-prize-winning wines in nearby Malagash, reports that out-of-province visitors who make it to his vineyard are definitely not coming off the toll highway. Unless they know the territory and are crafty enough to get on the Sunrise Trail at Amherst, they miss the exit that could have landed them at Jost's door. Another concern of Jost's is that now his business is even farther away from an all-weather high-way: weight restrictions mean he has to ship out his trucks half-empty.

For people on the North Shore, the toll road has meant opportunities missed. Much might have been accomplished if they had managed to convince government to take a serious look at the potential described in a \$12,000 study paid for by the communities themselves in 1991, but it seems that, even then, the decision had already been made. Still, spirited people in Tatamagouche did not give up. Instead, they embarked on a number of projects aimed at self-sufficiency. Theda Boyce of the North Shore Development Association reports that enterprising folks, having been denied four lanes of pavement, decided instead to get on the information

highway and make the world come to them. The thriving Smart Rural Communities program is attracting cyber-business, as well as spin-off benefits. Perhaps they'll invent a way to get the tourists back too.

Meanwhile, back on Westchester Mountain, the village closest to the toll highway is stressed by too much business. The 23 members of the Westchester Volunteer Fire Department have been called out to accidents on the Cobequid Pass sixteen times in the past year, and the tiny community simply can't afford to maintain this pace. Fire Chief Avarad Bentley points out that there are many costs involved, including losses at the local lumber mill, which has to shut down every time there's an accident call, because three-quarters of its workers are also volunteer firefighters. Atlantic Highways, which is profiting from the toll road, has never answered the brigade's appeals for reimbursement.

Chief Avarad Bentley doesn't think local people should be expected to subsidize a money-making highway. Nor should any of us: we are all paying for it, whether or not we personally drop three dollars at the toll booth. We are all paying more for imported goods and groceries, as trucking companies pass along their extra costs to the consumer. And all Nova Scotians pay when governments make deals with private enterprise that work against the survival of rural communities.

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