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Roads from Riches: How the Ring of Fire can improve living conditions in the Far North

By: Rick Millette

What is the one thing that would make living in Ontario's Far North communities better?

If you asked that question to seven people knowledgeable about the North, you might very well get seven different answers: clean drinking water, functional sewer systems, quality education, improved health services, reliable electricity, healthy food at affordable prices, better housing.



Rick Millette is a senior executive director specializing in the Ring of Fire for the Northern Policy Institute.

To a large degree, this wish list stems from the fact that Ontario's Far North communities are accessible only by air for most of the year. These challenges rarely exist for communities with road access. Astronomically high costs are attached to anyone or anything that has to fly to these places. Winter ice roads provide some relief but are not a guarantee. If the weather co-operates, an ice road might provide a month or two of access in every year. There have been poor weather conditions in recent years attributed to global warming. If the pattern continues, winter road construction and use will be progressively problematic.

So what is the one thing that would make living in the Far North better?

Answer: a network of year-round roads.

While there are correlations to improving the quality of life at all levels through road access, none illustrate the benefits more strongly or tangibly than food and fuel.

Webequie is the First Nations community closest to the Ring of Fire and about 260 kilometres by air from Pickle Lake. Recently you would have found the following prices for basics at the local store: \$4.50 for a quart of milk, \$42 for 10 kilograms of sugar, \$49 for 10 kilograms of flour or \$6 for a loaf of bread. If you wanted a friend in Pickle Lake to do some shopping for you and ship the goods by air, the shipping cost per



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pound is \$1.32 including fuel surcharge and HST. So, while you might find a 10-pound bag of potatoes for \$4 at a Pickle Lake grocery store, it would cost you another \$13.20 to ship it to Webequie.

Gas is in the range of \$2.60 per litre. That makes it expensive to run snowmobiles and small equipment, but it's the diesel fuel and heating oil costs that really hurt. These two fuels are needed for keeping community electrical generators running 24/7/365 and for the oil furnaces that keep homes, schools, clinics and band offices warm through long, cold winters that consume fuel at horrific rates.

Here's one more illustration that crystalizes the punishing costs of bringing services into these communities. Flying a medical professional, a water technician or a government worker between Thunder Bay and Webequie means a ticket price of \$700 at the time of this writing. Air France was offering a return ticket from Toronto to Europe for less than \$600 the same week.

This is not an attack on the Northern food stores or airlines. They need to stay profitable under risky, expensive and difficult operating conditions. Economies of scale make it understandable to cheaply fly 400 people in an Airbus instead of 18 people on a Beechcraft. If there was a year-round road from Webequie to Pickle Lake, the store in Webequie would be able to get their deliveries at far lower prices that could be passed on to residents.


Roads connecting some or all of the five fly-in communities surrounding the Ring of Fire are on the threshold of becoming a reality. Why stop there? Why not use the momentum and the expertise of the construction crews and the trained local workers who will be ready to operate everything from heavy equipment to survey tools? Let's have a construction plan and a timetable to eventually connect all the North's fly-in communities with permanent roads.

There is no question that thousands of kilometres of road construction will cost billions of dollars. But it can be argued that the cost savings of delivering goods and people to more than 30 communities by road would also save billions of dollars in very little time. And to paraphrase the popular line from MasterCard, the enhancement in life quality would be priceless.

To see the potential of Ontario's Northern road vision, it only requires a look over the border to our neighbours. Quebec's premier is about to launch "Le Plan Nord" which will see an investment of \$80-billion over 25 years to expand mining and develop energy resources in northern Quebec.

You can already drive from Montreal to the Arctic waters of James Bay on 1,456 kilometres of paved road to the Cree coastal community of Chisasibi. That roadway was made possible by the realized dream of building a hydro-electric dam on La Grande Rivière.

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