

# Bridge over troubled traffic only increases congestion



BRIAN GOULD

Over the summer, with the debate on the 23 Avenue and Gateway Boulevard interchange raging, I wondered how far City Council would be willing to go to speed long-distance commuters downtown. Building the interchange won't fix the perceived problem, only move it somewhere else—so I asked if they were prepared to run a freeway through the heart of Old Strathcona and Whyte Avenue and destroy the river valley to build a bridge.

Earlier this month, I got my answer—and in case you're keeping score, I was only off on the timeline. I thought they'd at least wait for the interchange to be built, but only five months later they've already got their sights set on the next "traffic crisis."

Masquerading as a replacement for the aging Walterdale Bridge at 105 Street, a proposed wider bridge connecting to Gateway Boulevard is quickly becoming a freeway starter pack, with overpasses, off-ramps, and new sections of road being trenched across a park and through two blocks of apartments.

The proposed road will split the Fringe site in two and will need retaining walls and pedestrian bridges—something that will only exacerbate the existing wrong-side-of-the-tracks problem.

The first stage might—and that's still a big *might*—spare the immediate Whyte Avenue area. Unfortunately, while increasing the river valley crossing capacity there will take away the main constraint on Gateway Boulevard traffic volumes, it will result in a sharp increase in traffic across Whyte Avenue. Bigger and better cities abandoned this type of project long ago because it doesn't make sense to trade destinations for roads.

When these roads inevitably need "upgrading," we'll start tearing down heritage buildings, and the whole area will lose its character and ability to differentiate itself from the rest of Edmonton. People will stop caring about Old Strathcona, and that's when a full-blown freeway will gain support.

There's a persistent 1950s school of transportation-engineering thought that claims that traffic is like water and that roads are like pipes: when one backs up, water will simply spill over into other pipes. So if a city's a house, these engineers are the plumbers—but while the water metaphor is apt, their interpretation is only partially correct. If a major road backs up, some drivers will short-cut on side streets, but widening the road isn't a solution at all.

Just like a pressurized pipe, widening a road means more flow and more turbulence, and a temporarily free-flowing Gateway Boulevard would only encourage more cars to clog it up. When one of these big, ugly pipes fills up, they need to swap it out for a smaller, more efficient pipe instead; congested roads will then encourage people to start taking the free-flowing



SAMBROOKS

PEANUT BUTTER AND TRAFFIC JAM SANDWICH New roads help in the short term, but eventually, they'll end up like this.

buses, unclogging the pipes in the process.

Unfortunately, when you let these plumbers in the door, they just won't leave. Once they "fix" a pipe in one place, it just clogs in another while that bigger new pipe just fills right back up. But it's when they're allowed to stay too long that they start to do real damage. Suddenly, they're not just plumbers—they're interior decorators offering to spruce the place up with a nice new faucet or jacuzzi. And when you buy in to those ideas, your water bill shoots through the roof.

We've been letting plumbers push out the interior decorators in this city for too long, and the results are places like South Edmonton Common: one big room with a thousand showerheads, all running full tilt. Leave them alone, and the piping starts working its way into the structure of the house—and you're left with Edmonton's endless sprawl and the highest car dependency in Canada.


It's five months later, and we have a new, hopefully more forward-thinking City Council. We should be focusing on smarter strategies—a simple carpool lane would do wonders—but here we are, standing on the precipice of a honking, screeching mess of a freeway through the best part of the city.

The transportation department report even admits that it's just going to clog again once it gets closer to downtown, and there's no obvious route for southbound traffic. So I ask again: how far are we willing to go?

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