

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The project includes improvements to a 5 km section of Highway 17 from the Manitoba / Ontario border easterly, as a Group 'B' project as defined in the MTO *Class Environmental Assessment for Provincial Transportation Facilities* (2000). The study objective is to four-lane Highway 17 between the Manitoba / Ontario Border and Kenora and this section is one of 3 sections being studied between these limits.

Highway 17 is the only east-west highway link between Kenora and the Manitoba border. As part of the Trans-Canada Highway, it serves long-distance commercial and tourist traffic, local community traffic, and provides access to the lands surrounding the highway. As such, Highway 17 is an essential component of the regional and provincial economies.

As part of the *Ontario Places to Grow Act*, background documents illustrate that the Province recommends the improvement of northwestern Ontario highways for road safety and economic benefits. Northwestern Ontario highways are mostly two-lane facilities, and have infrequent passing lanes and rest stops. The collision rate for this section of Highway 17 is 0.74 collisions per million vehicle-kilometers of travel (MVKM); this is higher than the provincial average for King's Highways in Ontario (0.7 collisions per MVKM in 2006). Collisions may lead to highway closures, which in many cases result in lost time and money, especially where there is a lack of alternative routes.

By 2016, daily traffic is expected to grow by approximately 20-25% from 2006 levels. This would bring the annual average daily traffic to 5220 vehicles, and the summer average daily traffic to 8640 vehicles. A four-lane highway would provide adequate capacity to accommodate the future traffic increase.

Recommended Plan

This project includes extensive consultation with the public, interest groups and all interested government agencies. It was concluded that the most appropriate way to improve traffic operations and accommodate future traffic along Highway 17 within the project limits is to proceed with the plans described below:

- Twinning of Highway 17 to provide 2 additional lanes to accommodate existing and future traffic and address road safety concerns;
- A median crossover intersection will be provided at the Ontario Travel Information Centre to allow access to the site from both directions of Highway 17, and to facilitate U-turn movements. Left and right-turn lanes will be provided at this intersection;
- Closure of some redundant or obsolete accesses; all other accesses will be configured as right-in/right-out intersections, with no median crossover;
- Implement drainage improvements, including culvert extensions where necessary;
- Implement detouring / staging as required to maintain two basic lanes for through traffic during construction; and
- Transition lighting will be provided at the divided/undivided highway transition.

The selected route is shown in **Exhibit 2-4** of the Transportation Environmental Study Report (TESR). In addition, **Appendix C** of the TESR contains Preliminary Design Plan plates for the proposed improvements.

Information about the following environmental conditions was collected to compare alternatives for the highway twinning and to assess the environmental impacts of the selected design:

- Transportation: including traffic operations, geometrics, access management, continuity of local road network, road safety, and staging flexibility;
- Natural Environment: including physiography and soils, groundwater, aquatic resources and fisheries, vegetation resources, wildlife resources and environmentally designated areas;
- Socio-Economic Environment: including property requirements, impacts on existing and future land uses, utilities, site contamination, and noise; and
- Cultural Environment: including archaeology, built heritage, and cultural landscape resources.

Within the project area, there are:

- No Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI) – regionally / provincially significant or life science / earth science;
- No Provincially Significant Wetlands (PSWs) and or Locally Significant Wetlands (LSWs);
- No Areas of Significant Wildlife Habitat (Aquatic Feeding Area);
- No Environmentally Sensitive Areas;
- No Environmental Conservation Areas;
- No known Archaeological sites anticipated to be impacted; and
- The selected route does not directly impact any adjacent private properties.

Environmental impacts that are associated with this four-laning can be mitigated and no adverse environmental effects are anticipated with the application of mitigation noted in **Section 7**. Identified Concerns and Proposed Mitigation are summarized in **Section 7.16**.

In 2009, the Federal and Ontario Provincial governments jointly announced financing for the four-laning of 10 km of Highway 17, from the Manitoba border easterly. This funding will allow construction to start in 2010, pending environmental approvals. These improvements are expected to lower the accident rates in the area and provide long-term capacity for traffic growth.

A Public Information Centre (PIC) for the study was held July 28th, 2009. The PIC provided interested stakeholders, including municipal and external agency representatives, local residents, business owners and the public an opportunity to review the projects and discuss with members of the Project Team. Following consultation with interested government agencies and the general public, the Transportation Environmental Study Report (TESR) was completed. Any refinements to the preliminary design of the selected route will be incorporated based on public and external agency input. Route planning and preliminary design for Section 3 will be initiated with the development and evaluation of route alternatives, in consultation with the public and external agencies.

The Highway 17 improvements for Section 1 and 2 are part of a joint Federal / Provincial funding initiative.