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Residents discuss Highway 3 issues: Current concerns and future plans considered at workshop

The highway among us has been a topic of discussion and sometimes debate for as long as it has existed. The latest round of examination came on Wednesday, May 28, courtesy of a community workshop hosted by the Crowsnest Conservation Society. The workshop featured two components – the first a series of presentations about different aspects of the highway, and the second a set of group discussions among community members to talk about the highway and its future.

The main attraction, so to speak, was a presentation from Don Snider, a planning manager with Alberta Transportation. Snider spoke about how transportation planning and the environment work together, and also about where the department is currently aiming for future Highway 3 development.

Snider said that the department's planning studies look up to 50 years ahead for what transportation needs will be. They do this planning not only to be prepared, he said, but so they can protect right of ways that they know they will need in the future, and so that communities can take the department's planning into account when making decisions of their own.

The currently planned future route for Highway 3, taking it south of Coleman, has been in place since 1979, but don't expect to see any action on it anytime soon. Snider said that there is nothing planned in the next five years, and that the project is likely still on the 20 to 30 year horizon. He added that they may simply create a two-lane truck bypass to start with, rather than a full realignment, but nothing is certain.

Though the future alignment has been set for nearly 30 years now, Snider said that they still do planning and consultations on the matter. They have held meetings with council in recent years, and they last held a local public open house in 2004.

"It's not cast in stone," he said. "We revise (our plans)." He noted that public consultation has already led to at least two slight adjustments in the planned future alignment.

For the interim, said Snider, Alberta Transportation plans to make some intersection improvements in the Pass and create four lanes between Coleman and Blairmore to help traffic flow better.

Snider said that a full environmental study has been done for the future Highway 3 alignment, even though under provincial legislation a study may not have technically been required. Wildlife and water issues were examined, he said, and discussed in

public consultations. Yet he added that wildlife crossing structures, such as those on Highway 1 through the national parks, would only be considered if and when Highway 3 becomes a full four-lane freeway where the only access to it would be through interchanges.

Traffic on Highway 3 has increased 27 percent in the last decade, said Snider, and in the summer Coleman in particular gets plugged up with traffic. Bypasses of communities are necessary, he said, for the high speed movement of goods and services. He said that along with Coleman, both Fort Macleod and Lethbridge will be bypassed eventually in the future as well. Blairmore and Bellevue, of course, were bypassed several decades ago.

Continuing the focus on Highway 3, the next presenter was Road Watch coordinator Rob Schaufele, who described the basics of their citizen science project and how it affects highway planning.

Road Watch is a program that takes wildlife observations from residents and compiles that information into a database and maps showing where animals cross Highway 3. The program is part of the Miistakis Institute.

Schaufele said that the information gathered by Road Watch is valuable for planning processes, and is used by Alberta Transportation, the municipality's developable lands mapping tool, and other agencies. "The community of Crowsnest Pass should be proud of their contributions to Road Watch," he said. "It increases public and decision maker awareness."

There are several ways people can get involved in the program. The simplest is to report any wildlife sightings along the highway, from big animals to small, from herbivores to carnivores. Sightings can be entered by calling 564-4833, or online at www.rockies.ca/roadwatch.

By registering on the website, said Schaufele, you can maintain a record of your own sightings and view a map of the Pass with only your own sightings displayed. In addition, residents can volunteer to do formal driving surveys. These include driving from one end of the Pass to the other at designated times, punching in any wildlife sightings to a special GPS unit that records the exact location automatically. Road Watch has been operating since November of 2004, and there have been 3800 recorded observations. Schaufele noted that locals know where wildlife tends to cross the highway, but that the information must be recorded before it can be presented to decision makers.

The event's facilitator, Carole Stark of the Chinook Institute for Community Stewardship, spoke about context sensitive planning, a type of highway planning process used widely in the United States. It considers the total context of a project, she said, including physical, aesthetic, safety, environmental, and economic concerns. Often a community task force works directly with transportation planners, she said, such

as in the Paris-Lexington Road project in Kentucky. The process there dragged on for three decades before context sensitive planning was used, and now it is held up as a leading model of what the method can achieve. The road was designed with help from a landscape architect to work around the existing landscape.

“It can help a project be in better harmony with a community,” she said. Snider added that Alberta is looking at similar things. Anything is possible, he said, as long as you have the political will to make it so.