

Roads: More than lines on a map

Place: East Side Lake Winnipeg (east side of Manitoba)

Case study #3

Road: Possible all-season road network linking more than 20 Aboriginal communities.

Issues: Incomplete provincial government-led land-use planning initiative; lack of support for community planning and risk that road network decisions could occur for development purposes and prior to planning; lack of road network planning; First Nation concerns regarding community access and reduced winter road access; potential for World Heritage Site and other significant protected areas; need to consider cumulative impacts; impacts on sensitive species such as woodland caribou.



The Manitoba government undertook a preliminary study to assess the need for and possible design of an all-weather road network for the East Side forest region in 2000. This region, which runs along the east side of Lake Winnipeg and into the province's northeast, includes 20 million hectares of boreal forest lands and waters, and remains mostly in its natural state with the full boreal forest ecosystem intact. Most communities in the region lack year-round road access.

Transportation costs to communities in northern Manitoba are high, and in recent years these remote communities have experienced unusually restricted winter road access as a result of late freeze up and early spring conditions. These additional access limitations, as well as the huge costs associated with transporting a larger proportion of goods by air, have heightened concerns about access. An all-weather road network would also open this remote area to forest harvesting and other resource exploration activities as well as hydro corridors, with associated potential benefits and impacts for communities in the region.

The proposed all-weather road network would follow the existing winter road system where feasible, but would also involve construction in areas previously not accessed by vehicular traffic. No environmental studies have been undertaken as yet. Manitoba Transportation has stated that the next step required is the completion of a detailed large area transport study for the full region, which would include social and environmental impacts with both highway and community access road options.

One option under consideration in the preliminary study would be to build an east-west all-weather road

to connect east-side communities above Lake Winnipeg with the Norway House Cree Nation. The other all-weather road option would be to build a north-south road that would connect east-side communities with the village of Manigotagan, the most northerly community currently connected by all-weather road to Winnipeg. The engineering study for the main stem of this new all-weather road option has not been released, despite being almost a year overdue.

Traditional lands in the East Side region are part of an Accord by First Nations; an agreement to work together to protect their traditional territories and seek designation as a World Heritage Site. Aside from an 800,000 hectare wilderness park reserve provisionally secured by Poplar River First Nation, there are four other parks in the region: One wilderness park which is fully protected, and three natural parks that contain zones protected from development as well as zones that allow resource extraction. There are no protected areas in natural regions northeast of Lake Winnipeg except for Wapusk National Park, which borders the western shore of Hudson Bay.

There are several perspectives on the costs and benefits of all-weather roads in the region. For some First Nations and Aboriginal communities, roads are equated with economic opportunities and are viewed as necessary within a larger vision of community economic development. Other communities approach the issue with more caution, citing some of the documented socio-economic and environmental impacts of roads.

As noted in the East Side of Lake Winnipeg Road Scoping and Justification Study, "communities have concerns about the impacts of an All-Weather Road and the resulting resource development on traditional life-

styles, land use, the environment, and control over their future destinies.”

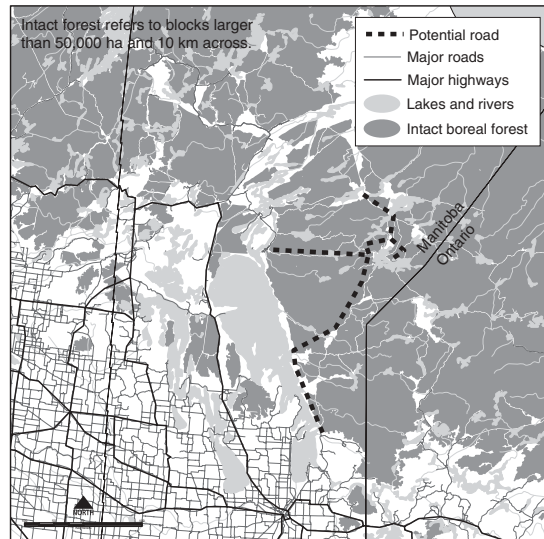
Access to resources resulting from the creation of an all-weather road network, and the resulting interest from various industries, is a significant consideration for communities. This possibility is welcomed by some, and viewed with concern by others. Consequently, control over access is also a fundamental concern for some communities. Issues such as decision-making control over the routing of a road, control over secondary access routes, and how and by whom the road is used have been identified as important community concerns.

Some communities also recognize the need for extensive planning in advance of all-weather roads to control and mitigate some of the negative impacts that can result from access. However, traditional occupancy studies, land-use plans, and inventories of natural systems have not been completed for all communities and their associated traditional lands.

All-weather roads will be subject to an environmental assessment under the Manitoba Environment Act. Given that the proposed road network is intended to facilitate access to First Nation communities, would almost certainly involve federal funds (due to the federal fiduciary duty to First Nations), and would be partially built on First Nation reserve lands, the project would also be subject to environmental assessment under the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act (CEAA).

The question, however, is whether the road network will be assessed as a single project or in piecemeal segments. The latter approach is likely to obscure or divert attention away from cumulative impacts, such as the impact of opening a previously inaccessible area to industrial resource harvesting. Unfortunately, there are signs that this potential risk may already be becoming a reality: A portion of the all-weather road network has already been approved.

The engineering study for the section between the end of the current all-weather road at Manigotagan and Bloodvein First Nation may be completed, but it has



not been made public or provided to the affected communities; nor has the project been reviewed under the Manitoba Environment Act. Crossing the Bloodvein Heritage River, a trigger under CEAA, had stopped previous attempts to build this road. The rationale for moving forward with this portion of the all-weather road in isolation is that it is already partially in place (it has been used as a winter road and logging road), and is a common route regardless of the alignment decisions for the broader region.

Land-use planning for a portion of this region was announced in 2000 and initiated in 2002 following two decades of discussion. The East Side Planning Initiative (ESPI) submitted a status report to the Minister of Conservation in November 2004. The report made preliminary recommendations to the Minister as to how to move forward with planning. The Minister accepted several of these recommendations, including restructuring the ESPI and establishing the East Side First Nations Council (ESFNC) to lead Phase III of the ESPI. The Minister also committed to support for licensing of the extension of the existing Rice River Road to the Bloodvein First Nation. However, very little other detail regarding the next stage of planning has been made publicly available.

Some First Nation communities to the east of Lake Winnipeg are moving forward with their own planning processes and are beginning to articulate their vision for their traditional lands. Planning processes at the community level are critical to identifying the risks and benefits of road access, and developing strategies and plans to manage access.

The East Side network is an excellent example of the potential cascading impacts of road networks. The rationale of creating easier access to remote communities may be quickly supplanted in actuality by use of the network to reach previously inaccessible forests and other resources. The need for detailed community-level planning, combined with broadly focused land-use planning, in advance of road planning and construction in this region is very clear, but government intentions remain cloudy.