

Coquihalla scheme sparks opposition

Businesses and public join in anti-toll chorus

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Opposition is mounting to the provincial government's plans to raise tolls and privatize the Coquihalla Highway.

Public meetings, petitions and a rally are being held as anger grows to last month's decision to privatize the 135-kilometre stretch between Hope and Merritt under a 55-year contract.

The province plans to lease the highway in return for an up-front payment of \$500-600 million for other road needs.

Victoria will give up about \$42 million in annual toll revenue. Whoever wins the contract will be able to charge private cars \$13, up from the current \$10 to drive on this highway, but commercial vehicles will be exempt from the increase.

Yet even traditional allies of the B.C. Liberals, such as the B.C. Trucking Association and the B.C. Chamber of Commerce, are opposed. More than 5,000 people have signed a petition against privatization.

And a rally, organized by the Kamloops-based Save the Coquihalla Coalition, will be held tomorrow at 1 p.m. at the Coquihalla toll booths, 50 kilometres south of Merritt. About 500 vehicles are expected.

The B.C. Chamber of Commerce voted unanimously last month for the government to retain ownership and to remove tolls as soon as the highway is paid for in full.

"There's a tremendous amount of opposition," said Kamloops chamber president Rich Denis, who attended a meeting this week in Kamloops organized by local Liberal MLAs Claude Richmond and Kevin Krueger.

"There [were] approximately 300 people at the meeting and I didn't hear one person who supported their position."

Krueger, who demanded during the New Democratic Party government's tenure that the tolls be removed, said: "I, too, would like to see the tolls come off [but] unfortunately fiscal realities prevent us from doing this."

The mayors of Kamloops and Kelowna are against the proposal and Kelowna Coun. Ron Cannan said there is a groundswell of opposition throughout the Okanagan.

"People are feeling betrayed," NDP Leader Joy MacPhail said before speaking at a town hall meeting in Kelowna last night.

"People are so upset that the tolls will be on the highway for at least 55 years."

The planned one-way toll would increase by 30 per cent from \$10 to \$13.

That prospect has prompted the distribution in the Interior of a \$13 bill depicting a mug shot of Premier Gordon Campbell after his arrest in Hawaii for driving while drunk. Wording on the phoney money declares the tolls to be "highway robbery." The fake notes are purportedly signed by "Gordon Campbell, the prince of privatization and never-ending tolls."



'If a private company can make a profit, and make a go of these things, why can't a competent government do the same?' asked this man opposed to the Coquihalla privatization at a meeting in Kelowna Thursday night. (Global BC)



Motorists face Coquihalla tolls that could last for 55 years under privatization plan. (The Province)

MacPhail, who said a private operator will make more than \$2 billion in profit over the 55 years, has introduced a private member's bill to stop the scheme.

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