Airport interchange should be a priority

BY GORDON DENFORD

The editorial "Smart decisions needed on roads," Feb. 16, 2010, underscored the priority of the McTavish Road interchange overpass on the Portage Bay highway, and called for a regional transportation strategy before island bridging.

The Portage Bay highway is the key multi-modal route between Greater Victoria and the mainland. It links Victoria International Airport, B.C. Ferries and Washington State Ferries to our community.

It brings political and business leaders, families, friends, visitors, an overwhelming majority of tourists and most of the goods and materials we rely on every day. Portage Bay is the gateway to our capital city, our region and southern Vancouver Island.

Sadly, needed improvements on the Portage Bay highway have been recognised and studied for more than 20 years. In fact, the provincial government proposed the construction in 1983 and again in 1994, which, had they been built then, would have cost the taxpayer considerably less than today.

Furthermore, the Portage Bay highway would have become a safer and far less congested highway at peak periods. However, local politics and provincial thinking of the day created obstacles that made the project less viable.

The Victoria Airport Authority has repeatedly called for a decision to be made on the interchange so that the state of its runways can be upgraded.

The airport authority board believes Greater Victoria deserves better. Our community has a vital role to play in welcoming visitors to British Columbia in 2010. The McTavish Road interchange has been put forward for provincial funding because it is the best candidate for action.

The existing situation is restrictive, dangerous and frustrating for people travelling to and from what has become a world-class airport.

Other interchanges, although also important to our gateway highway, from a safety and efficiency perspective are more complex, involve much acquisition of private land, are more costly and do not offer the same opportunities for partnerships.

What distinguishes the McTavish Road interchange from all the others is:

• The $11 million to $12 million cost is considerably less expensive.

• The province has 56% of all of the required land.

• North Saanich council has offered to consider the rezoning of surplus provincial land, created by the project, to resolve the province to recover some of the capital cost.

• The Victoria Airport Authority has offered to participate in a partnership with the provincial government.

It has solid community support and can be completed by fall 2010. The time to act is now. If we are to achieve the stated goal of the province to double airport revenue in the next few years, now is the time to act.

The construction of the McTavish interchange will not solve all of the problems of the gateway highway, but it is infinitely better than doing nothing and much better than another decade of studies.

Gordon Denford is chairmen of the Victoria Airport Authority.
Travellers mingle in the plaza area of Victoria International Airport. Victoria Airport Authority chairman Gordon Denford suggests proposed improvements to the McTavish Road intersection that provides access to the airport are long overdue.