

NORTH SHORE

Although vehicle count across the second narrows may have been static - the nature of those vehicles has not. This I believe is the underlying cause of increased congestion. - cjk

Stressed commuters face 'tipping point' on traffic

Building boom and shift in travel plans causing jams

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NORTH SHORE NEWS

It wasn't always this way.

Unless there was a stall or accident, cars would zip down the Cut each afternoon, hit the Ironworkers Memorial Second Narrows Crossing and disappear to all points south of the Burrard Inlet.

Then, sometime in late 2012, the Cut started becoming routinely backed up to Westview Avenue, and other feeder routes to the highway along Keith Road, Third Street and Low Level Road became equally clogged.

"You talk to anybody on the streets of the North Shore and ask them, 'What's the major issue here?' They'll say it's the traffic that emanates from the bridge-head," says District of North Vancouver Mayor Richard Walton.

The Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure hired a consultant more than a year ago to help determine why the traffic flow between the top of the Cut in North Vancouver and Willingdon Avenue in Burnaby has become so bad in recent years, and what can be done about it.

It's a question of numbers and a theoretical tipping point at which a busy highway turns into a parking lot.

Traffic engineer Jason Jardine recently presented an update on the study to District of North Vancouver council members and its conclusions aren't what most people would expect.

The increasing traffic woes on the North Shore aren't caused so much by more people living here as they are by more people working here, the study suggests. And they're coming to work in one industry in greater numbers than ever before — residential construction.

The building boom is mostly being felt in single-family neighbourhoods.

"Quite often, the situation is a lot more complex," Walton said.

"We know a lot more information than we did a year ago and we have to understand that information before we can make meaningful solutions because they can take 10 or 15 years of shifting investment and policy to address."

According to the last 10 years of data, the North Shore's population has been growing by about half a per cent per year while the total number of daily trips over the Second Narrows bridge grew at a slightly slower rate.



NICK PROCAYLO/PNG

Traffic on the Second Narrows Bridge.

But along with changing demographics and ballooning land prices there's been a shift in commuting patterns.

The percentage of North Shore residents who also work on the North Shore has risen from 46 per cent to 50 per cent, but the number of people commuting from south of the Burrard Inlet has gone up by 14 per cent from 17,260 to 19,660, according to census data.

Jardine compared that number with the volume of building and demolition permits granted by the North Shore's three municipalities and found similar growth, suggesting much of the new traffic is building contractors coming to work on North and West Vancouver homes.

The census numbers likely don't capture many of the subcontractors who are only here working on a job site for a couple weeks at a time, Walton said.

Those extra workers, combined with employment growth happening on the North Shore's expanding industrial waterfront, have pushed the stressed highway beyond its tipping point — somewhere between 4,000 and 4,500 vehicles per hour.

"I think we've been close to that tipping point for many years now," Jardine said. "You can get a certain amount of traffic through a bottleneck and when things fail, they fail very badly ..."

The study, which the City of North Vancouver and the District of West Vancouver are also keeping a close eye on, should help focus the municipalities on how to resolve the problem.