

# The Glengarry News

## Seeing Red: Emergency 401 response services are burning through South Glengarry budgets

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Having a series 400 highway running through South Glengarry brings new visitors and business to the area.

“Travelers stop because of the 401, they get gas and then they ask us where they can buy gifts or find a nice place to eat,” said MacEwen’s gas station cashier Lucie Bourck. Owner Jen Eamer agreed: “Being so close to the 401 brings traffic to Lancaster and really helps my business. Roughly 60% of my business comes from Quebec because our gas prices are so much better but it helps other businesses too. Some of our Quebecois customers come here so often that we consider them regulars. In fact, many of them have come to like the area so much, they want to move here.”

Nevertheless, South Glengarry Mayor Ian McLeod is fuming over highway-related expenses.

“Highway 401 is a burden on our resources,” said Mayor McLeod. “When you speak to the politicians at Queen’s Park they say well, you’re so fortunate to have Highway 401 going through your community and traffic coming through. But in our case, it’s costing us money and resources.”

With tight budgets and little flexibility in generating new revenues, there’s not enough money in the Township of South Glengarry’s coffers to sustain the costs associated with the highway.

### **Road Hazards: Detour there’s a muddy road ahead**

401 detours cause damage to municipal infrastructure, strain South Glengarry resources, cause traffic congestion on rural roads and present dangers to commuters and local residents.

"The fact that the 401 is a two-lane highway in our region for the most part, means that it has the capacity is there to handle the traffic amount," explained Fire Chief Robertson. "But in times when we have road closures, they severely affect our municipality in terms of having traffic re-routed onto county roads."

While designated Emergency Detour Routes (EDR) generally feature paved roads which are constructed to a higher standard, “anyone with a GPS will try to find the quickest way back onto the highway,” remarked Mayor McLeod.

Delays can lead to frustrated commuters venturing off EDRs making for stories that are the stuff of country music classics.

Smartphone apps – such as Waze – don’t help matters. While Waze helps commuters beat traffic by crowd-sourcing information from roughly 75 million users worldwide on traffic congestion, construction, and collisions they can also cause problem. Re-routing drivers towards time-saving routes, country roads and quiet residential streets can turn into busy – and sometimes dangerous - shortcuts.

"It’s fairly common to have subsequent issues and collisions as a result of having all traffic coming onto the EDR routes and local roads," Fire Chief Robertson pointed out. "When you put the amount

of taken off the 401 and then put it onto the smaller tertiary municipal roads and EDR routes, there are a lot of traffic issues."

"At times there have been damages brought onto municipal properties and municipal roads due to traffic volumes, and such. In today's world of GPS systems, people don't limit themselves to EDR routes, they will go onto local roads which causes issues with traffic volumes and puts a strain on road infrastructure," said the fire chief. "We have trucks going on roads that are not designed for that," added Mayor McLeod. "If we submit the costs to the province, we won't get compensated. We don't get paid for that."

Ewen MacDonald, Township of South Glengarry General Manager of Infrastructure, observed, "The tendency is that some people will stray off official EDR routes looking for faster routes. Where that causes us the most grief is that municipal roads can't sustain the traffic from the 401, particularly the transport trucks. Our roads aren't built for that type of traffic or the number of transport trucks you might get on that detour."

Of particular concern is the South Service Road which, according to SG officials, is often used as an unapproved detour when the 401 is shut down. The artery runs alongside the highway from Lancaster to Curry Hill. "There are a number of curves on that road and that can be a challenge for heavy traffic and large trucks," said Mr. MacDonald. Its use as a detour reduces its lifespan and can cause damage to signage, guardrails and other infrastructure which means added costs for local taxpayers.

To reduce road damage, the South Service Road must be closed during 401 shut-downs. However, this action requires a road crew to redirect 401 traffic back onto the official EDRs.

"We'll have to deploy resources to make sure that 401 traffic isn't using roads we don't want them on. That costs us money. Depending on what we have to deploy, it could cost the township roughly \$200 to \$300 an hour," said Mr. MacDonald. "These days, whenever the 401 is closed, it's very rarely for a short period of time. If there's an accident it's typically anywhere from 6 to 24 hours depending on the severity of the accident. It adds up and it's the taxpayers who have to pay for it."

SG Roads Manager Chris LeBlanc concurred. "If people are detoured off the highway, like in Bainsville right now, a lot of people don't use the EDR signs and will use their GPS to find the shortest routes," said Mr. LeBlanc. "It def puts a strain on our roads when the 401 is closed, especially the stretch between Lancaster and the Quebec border. I usually close South Service Road so that we can maintain it. It's not built for the heavy truck traffic you get on the 401."

"I'll give you an example with Fraser Road and Loyalist Road," said Mr. LeBlanc. "The truckers will try to go down these roads but they can't turn around which causes damage to signage and other infrastructure. We've had to repair the guardrail on Finney's Bridge a number of times because of that. It's takes a lot of time to fix that and maintain it. It can also be dangerous for local commuters. Heaven forbid an accident happens before we have a chance to repair it and a car goes through that broken section of the guardrail."

When asked for a response to these concerns, MTO Regional Communications Coordinator Brandy Duhaime stated: "Municipalities are responsible for the operation and maintenance of infrastructure under their jurisdiction including Emergency Detour Routes (EDRs).

Municipalities maintain all EDR signs and the operation of all traffic signals on roads within their jurisdiction. Municipalities may consult with OPP and adjacent road authorities to identify and communicate potential traffic impacts and recommend improvements." Going on to re-

emphasize, “The province does not pay for the provision of emergency services on municipal roads as a result of provincial highway detours. Municipalities have the option of billing drivers directly for emergency services.”

## **Call 911! South Glengarry Mayor and Fire Chief attempt to put out flaming budgets**

### **Fire response costly**

“If there is an incident on the 401 and we get a 911 call, it’s expected that our local fire departments -- either at Glen Walter or Lancaster -- will respond to them,” said Mayor McLeod.

“Province sets out in laws the service standards for almost all municipal government services,” said Executive Director Pat Vanini of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO)

When a 911 call comes in from the highway where speed limits are over 100 km per hour, the guideline is to respond with at least three fire vehicles. The use of three vehicles allows for fire suppression, rescue and most importantly scene safety as the third vehicle is used as a blocker to protect response personnel until the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) or Ministry of Transportation (MTO) contractors can set up barriers.

Ms. Duhaime claims that, “Municipalities are reimbursed for the cost of providing emergency fire and rescue services on provincial highways owned by the ministry.” However, according to Mayor McLeod, “that doesn’t necessarily mean we’re going to be paid for it.”

According to an information report produced earlier this year, SG firefighters were dispatched to 46 highway calls in 2017. However, the municipality was only reimbursed for 26 calls leaving local tax payers shouldering a whopping \$43,170 in unrecoverable expenses. While in 2016, the ministry was left with \$22,950 in unrecoverable highway-related fire services expenses.

The report goes on to state that while the MTO reimburses some costs, municipalities are left to burden the costs associated with calls where fire crews are dispatched to a provincial highway, the call turns out to be a false alarm or crews aren’t needed when they arrive on scene. “If our fire departments are dispatched but there is no incident, then we don’t get paid for it. We don’t get compensated,” explained Mayor McLeod. “Why should the people of South Glengarry be paying for this?” asked Mayor McLeod.

### **The costs of crying wolf on HWY 401**

“Roughly five percent of the times that we respond to the highway nothing is ever found,” said Fire Chief Robertson. “That could happen when people see cars drive off the road, but maybe they drove back on the road and left the scene. So in that kind of incident we are not able to make a claim. As a result, South Glengarry has to absorb the cost.”

Glen Walter and Lancaster stations have a call-in staffing model. While volunteer firefighters don’t get paid a salary per se, they must be paid a stipend when they respond to a page whether the MTO reimburses the municipality or not.

It’s not just false alarms that leave South Glengarry tax payers in the lurch. For example, if our firefighters show up but the call is already being answered to by the police or paramedics, SG doesn’t get paid. But that’s not all...

No compensation is paid if a vehicle loses control and veers off the highway, over the ditch, smashes through a guardrail and stops on municipal property which is exactly what happened earlier this year.

“We had an incident where a car left 401, drove through the fence and ended up on the South Service Road,” said Mayor McLeod. “When we submitted the claim to the Ministry they said, well the car was on your road, not ours, so we’re not paying you.” In this case, the township was expected to absorb the costs of the fire department’s response and property damages.

“From a financial perspective,” said Treasurer and General Manager of Corporate Services Lachlan McDonald, “when events originating on the 401 have fiscal impacts that aren’t compensated by the Province, local citizens bear the cost via taxation.”

### **Out in the wide-open highway: Mayor worries about firefighter safety on HWY 401**

The South Lancaster Fire Department is no stranger to the dangers of working the 401. Harkening back to 2016, Mayor McLeod recalled an accident which caused the near-death of firefighter Randy Robertson, and \$350,000 worth of damage to a vehicle. “He’s still not back to work yet,” said Mayor McLeod. “That’s a loss to the residents of SD&G and to the Township of South Glengarry.”

#### **“Unbelievably dangerous”**

“When we are using our own volunteer fireman for traffic control people it’s a disaster waiting to happen. The safety issue is paramount,” cautioned Mayor McLeod. “Anytime you see anybody out there doing work, there’s signage way in advance of what you’re approaching, there’s sign trucks, there’s barrels, and they’ve got everything sectioned off. The province of Ontario - under their area maintenance contract - should have control of the highway before we get to it,” said Mayor McLeod.

While Ms Duhaime responded that “The decision to close and re-open a highway is made by the OPP who have the authority under the HTA [Highway Traffic Act].” Ms. Duhaime went on to explain that, “Under the terms of the contract, the AMC [Area Maintenance Contracts] contractors are required to provide the OPP with assistance to implement and maintain the closures. This could be providing traffic control, crash trucks, arrow boards, etc... or by placing signs if needed.”

From a surface perspective, it appears as though the MOT has safety measures for emergency highway response covered. Indeed, Mayor McLeod’s claims that the MTO has the resources to provide greater services to protect our fire crews while responding to 401 calls were confirmed by Ms. Duhaime. “The ministry also has ramp gates, changeable message signs and other static signs available in strategic locations to assist the OPP in implementing closures and notifying road users,” said Ms. Duhaime. “The ministry is also using fifty-eight of its existing signs (77) to display travel time information which should inform motorists if there are delays up ahead. The clean-up immediately following the collision is coordinated by the OPP.”

Nevertheless, according to Mayor McLeod, “when our fire guys go out there it’s just the wide open 401. It’s unbelievably dangerous.” Fire Chief Dave Robertson also expressed his concerns regarding safety issues along the 401. “The 401 is dangerous for responses,” said the fire chief.

However, the main issue for the Fire Chief Robertson is ensuring that the MOT provides refunds for all highway responses so that stations can plan ahead and be compensated for the work they do while having sufficient funding left over for training needs.

“All of our staff – for the most part – from those stations [Glen Walter and Lancaster] are trained on traffic safety procedures and how to respond on the 401 safely,” said Chief Robertson. “But the province does not pay for training; they only pay for our responses. Out of those refunds, we have

cover stipends for the firemen who responded, maintenance costs to the vehicles and equipment and any training needs.”

### **Municipal woes falling on death ears**

Mayor McLeod has been actively working to improve safety conditions and compensation packages for emergency responders for several years now. As an Eastern Ontario Wardens’ Caucus member, Mr. McLeod plans to bring these issues forward to the province through AMO.

“We’ve looked at the fiscal health of municipal governments and their operating costs. By design or default, what we are seeing is that municipal governments are left to fill the gaps left-over by provincial governments,” said AMO Executive Director Vanini. “Without compensation for dealing with 400 series highways, small municipal governments – like South Glengarry – don’t have the potential to raise money outside of increasing property taxes.” In other words, explained Ms. Vanini, “property taxpayers are subsidizing the province.”

According to Ms. Vanini, “municipalities own 60% of all infrastructure and need to maintain it or replace it when it is old or fails.” However, for each household tax dollar spent municipal governments only receive 9 cents while provincial governments receive 44 cents and the remaining 47 cents goes towards the federal government. “Capital investment and operational budget comes out of that 9 cents unless a municipality is lucky to get an infrastructure grant,” explained Ms. Vanini.

“We’ve met on several occasions with the Ministry of Transportation, we’ve explained our situation to them,” said McLeod. “But they shrug it off and say that’s the joy of having a 400 series highway going through your municipality.”

Ms. Duhaime confirmed that the Township of South Glengarry and other municipalities had brought the issue forward stating, “The ministry is aware of the concerns from various municipalities and has provided this information specifically to the Township of South Glengarry and others during numerous meetings.” However, they did not comment on what actions were being taken – if any – to provide more complete compensation for 401-related expenses.