



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

*...from the
director's chair*

Gimme empty acres

I've moaned long and loud over the years that drivers don't have sufficient parking in Canada. While miles of nothing in the wilderness – no facilities, no food, not even a paved shoulder – is frustrating and dangerous, the situation can be just as bad in major urban areas.

What's the closest truck stop to Vancouver? By my reckoning, it's in Chilliwack, which is over an hour east of town – and that's with no traffic. Halifax? Try the Irving in Enfield – also close to an hour out. Ottawa? The Nation's Capital? Right. There's a Petro-Pass on the east end of town where you can park a truck or two, but if you're hungry, the closest meal in town is the Antrim Truck Stop, about 45 minutes west of the city, or Herb's, about an hour to the east.

And how about Toronto? If you begin looking anywhere after noon, forget it. Truck stops in the Mississauga area fill up fast, and if you go east or west to Bowmanville or Milton, you're pretty well out of the city. Montreal is the same. Nothing within a reasonable distance – and what's there is usually full by dinnertime.

If you're counting miles – and who isn't – adding 50-100 miles to a trip getting back and forth to a parking place starts to take quite a chunk of profit out of the trip.

We've been after governments for years to take a serious look at the appalling lack of safe, accessible parking and rest areas for truckers in this country, but given the age-old federal-provincial squabbles of jurisdiction and funding, it's all too easy to pass this one off as some other authority's – or the private sector's – responsibility.

But our persistence seems to be paying off, at least in some small way in this big problem. A couple of OBAC members and I recently met with the folks at Infrastructure Ontario and Ontario's Ministry of

Transportation to provide insight into what truckers might want and/or need in a highway service area. Ontario is planning a major re-development of its existing network of 23 service centres located along Highways 400 and 401, selecting a single corporation to build, finance, maintain, and operate the whole works. The idea is to turn these dreary, unimaginative places into 24/7 "world-class" travel centres providing travellers and tourists with safe places to rest, eat, and refuel, according to the Ministry.

The successful bidder will need to demonstrate a commitment to road safety and come up with innovative ideas to bring better services to the travelling public and – Hallelujah – to the trucking industry as well.

We've already put forward a tonne of ideas about what would make a service centre "trucker friendly" and we'll be working with Infrastructure Ontario, MTO and the winning firm as the project moves forward. But don't hold your breath – we're talking about government, after all – we're not likely to notice changes until sometime in 2009. And while we'll see improved services with this project, it's not likely to result in a lot more parking spaces; they're working with existing sites and there's a limit to how much they can optimize land use.

So, we've made one small step forward – on a few hundred kilometres out of the thousands that trucks travel over each day – but that doesn't bring us much closer to solving the problem. If I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times, we simply don't have enough places to park 250,000 trucks for 10 hours out of every 24.

And while we're mighty pleased to find one enlightened group of bureaucrats like those we met with on the service centre project, there are still lots out there who

don't consider providing "public" parking for trucks a government priority. No place to comply with Hours-of-Service? Tough. Industry should be able to overcome that with more efficient scheduling and use of technology to speed up processes, to ensure drivers can get to designated rest areas without running out of hours. Bad weather, accidents, congestion, border line-ups? Too bad, that's trucking. And anyway, I've had some of them tell me, it's really up to private sector truck stops to provide adequate parking, along with all the other amenities and services truckers need on the road. Get real.

It's simply not fair to put the onus on truck stop owners to fix the problem. Paving a 10-acre lot costs a tonne of money, and most of that real estate doesn't generate a dime's worth of revenue. There was a time – before cardlock fueling and just-in-time delivery – that drivers actually stopped at truck stops and took the time to enjoy a meal. Now, drivers will stop and sleep, grab a coffee and a cinnamon bun in the morning and hit the road again. I'd guess it's pretty tough to sustain a 10-acre parking lot and a staff on coffee and sandwiches.

So I'll get on my soap box again and call for a concerted, co-operative effort to stop going around in circles on this one. Solutions are likely to be costly, complex and multi-jurisdictional, and will require all levels of government, the private sector, and the trucking industry to get involved. Kudos to the group behind the Ontario service centre renewal project – let's hope they're starting a trend.

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