

REVITALIZING THE BC RAIL CORRIDOR AS A PROVINCIAL TRADE AND TRANSPORTATION PRIORITY

Issue

British Columbia's trade and transportation networks face growing congestion, climate risk, and supply chain vulnerability, yet the former BC Rail corridor—linking the North, Interior, and Southwest to tidewater—has not been meaningfully incorporated into provincial transportation planning in over two decades. A revitalized BC Rail corridor would enhance redundancy, relieve pressure on key bottlenecks, unlock underutilized industrial lands, and strengthen provincial economic resilience.

Background

British Columbia's economy depends on efficient, reliable trade corridors connecting resource regions, manufacturing centres, and ports to domestic and international markets. Recent policy resolutions adopted by the BC Chamber of Commerce—including *Long-Term Infrastructure Plan (2024)*, *Strategic Investment in BC Ports and Transportation Corridors (2025)*, and *Keep B.C. Business Moving (2023)*—underscore the urgent need to mitigate congestion, address infrastructure bottlenecks, and strengthen supply chain resilience.

However, while significant attention has been given to highway expansion and specific rail bottlenecks in the Lower Mainland, the former BC Rail corridor has not been substantively incorporated into provincial long-term transportation strategies since its transfer to CN in 2004. This omission represents a missed opportunity to advance provincial economic and infrastructure objectives.

Corridor Redundancy and Supply Chain Resilience

The atmospheric river events of 2021 demonstrated the economic consequences of temporary closures of critical trade corridors, particularly Highway 1 and key Lower Mainland rail connections. With British Columbia serving as Canada's Pacific Gateway, the province requires corridor redundancy to reduce systemic risk.

A revitalized BC Rail corridor would:

- Provide additional north–south rail capacity connecting Northeast B.C., the Cariboo, and the Sea-to-Sky region to tidewater.
- Offer operational relief to constrained Lower Mainland infrastructure, including the Second Narrows and New Westminster rail crossings.
- Reduce overreliance on single-corridor rail and highway routes vulnerable to extreme weather events.

- Support emergency response and evacuation capacity in the event of wildfire, flood, or seismic disruption.

Redundancy is not duplication; it is risk management. Modern supply chains require multiple routing options to ensure continuity of trade.

Supporting Northern and Interior Economic Development

Northern and rural communities are foundational to British Columbia's economy, particularly in forestry, mining, energy, and agriculture. Highway corridors such as Highways 97 and 16 face increasing traffic volumes, safety concerns, and maintenance pressures. Rail alternatives can reduce heavy truck traffic, lower infrastructure wear, and decrease greenhouse gas emissions per tonne-kilometre.

The BC Rail corridor historically connected Fort Nelson, Mackenzie, Prince George and the Cariboo region to Southern Gateway tidewater at Squamish and Burrard Inlet. Renewed strategic focus on this corridor would:

- Provide a competitive transportation option for resource producers.
- Support emerging clean energy, critical minerals, and value-added manufacturing sectors.
- Enhance investment attractiveness in rural and remote regions.
- Offer a partial modal alternative to Highway 97 and Highway 1 corridors.

Unlocking Underutilized Industrial Lands

Industrial land shortages—particularly in the Lower Mainland—have been identified as a significant constraint to economic growth. In contrast, lands along the corridor such as Squamish rail yards and former mill sites at Chasm (Clinton), Exeter (100 Mile House), Williams Lake and Quesnel represent underutilized industrial land assets with direct rail adjacency.

Incorporating the BC Rail corridor into a provincial Long-Term Infrastructure Plan would better recognize and realize the value of these lands by:

- Enabling expanded rail-served industrial activity outside the congested Lower Mainland core.
- Supporting short line rail opportunities and new market entrants.
- Facilitating value-added processing closer to resource origin points.
- Reducing pressure on scarce Lower Mainland industrial land.

Aligning with Existing BC Chamber Policy

This resolution aligns directly with previously adopted BC Chamber policies calling for:

- A comprehensive provincial Long-Term Infrastructure Plan.
- Strategic investment in ports and transportation corridors.
- Improved regulatory processes for trade-enabling infrastructure investments.
- Action to address congestion and bottlenecks affecting goods movement.

Inclusion of the BC Rail corridor within provincial infrastructure planning is not a departure from existing policy direction; it is a logical extension necessary to achieve stated objectives.

To date, provincial transportation plans have emphasized highway investments and specific Lower Mainland rail pinch points, while largely overlooking the strategic potential of the full north–south rail corridor. Given evolving trade patterns, climate risk, population growth, and northern economic development, this approach warrants reconsideration.

THE CHAMBER RECOMMENDS

That the Provincial Government:

1. Include the full BC Rail corridor—from Squamish to Fort Nelson—within British Columbia’s Long-Term Infrastructure Plan as a strategic trade and transportation asset.
2. Undertake, in collaboration with industry, Indigenous communities, and local governments, a comprehensive feasibility and capacity assessment of revitalized and expanded rail service along the BC Rail corridor.
3. Develop policy and regulatory conditions that encourage new short line operators, investors, and market entrants to enhance competition, service levels, and innovation within the provincial rail transportation system.
4. Integrate BC Rail corridor planning with provincial highway, port, climate adaptation, and emergency management strategies to ensure corridor redundancy and supply chain resilience.
5. Report publicly on how the BC Rail corridor will be incorporated into future provincial transportation capital plans and trade corridor strategies.

Submitted by the Squamish Chamber of Commerce