



A high speed rail link could weld Alberta

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Lord Strathcona had the honour of driving the last spike at Craigellachie, Eagle Pass, B.C. A plaque marks the spot where Canada was connected coast to coast.

Perhaps Premier Ed Stelmach will duplicate that honour. Only this golden spike would be driven to honour the bullet train that links Calgary, Red Deer, and Edmonton with Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat. That plaque could celebrate welding Alberta north to south.

Imagine, for a moment, Albertans boarding a bullet train, settling into comfortable seats and whizzing to their destinations at speeds of close to 300 km/h. They discover what train aficionados have long known; high-speed train travel is superior to auto or air because of its on-time reliability, small environmental footprint, and enormous infrastructure savings.

By 2028, Alberta will have about five million citizens, enough to support a high-speed rail system. About four million will live in the Edmonton-to-Calgary corridor and the Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo region. They will demand a fast and efficient transportation system that operates safely during the worst blizzards and the finest languid days of summer.

Bullet trains are good for the environment. Biologists say it is easier to protect sensitive wetlands and species at risk as they require much less land. Trains encourage citizens to leave their cars in garages and fewer cars reduce the expensive need to build more highways, interchanges, and bridges. It also means motorists use less gasoline and, with oil at \$100 a barrel, they will save more money.

When a high-speed train links with municipal light rail and bus systems, studies show more people ride the rails. Railways also significantly reduce air emissions because bullet trains use one-third the energy that planes need and one-fifth what a car requires.

Municipal planners like trains. Transportation corridors are smaller than highway right-of-ways, cost less to build and can be expanded quickly as demand grows. Experts claim railways help manage population growth because they stimulate in-fill development and curb urban sprawl. High-density areas create community, are more efficient to operate, and save energy costs. Best of all, no one lives on the wrong side of the tracks.

Obviously, the Calgary Chamber of Commerce is a fan of bullet trains, when and where they make economic sense. They bring the allure of no parking hassles, no bumper-to-bumper traffic on the Alberta autobahn, and no landing at an airport north of Red Deer necessitating exorbitant taxi fees. It is an enticing dream, but one generally ignored by politicians and Albertans.

So, why does the province not get this train on track? It is awaiting the results of a feasibility study and a ridership survey. Both are due soon. Is there sufficient demand for it to operate without generous subsidies from taxpayers? How much will it cost to build? Current estimates put the price tag at more than \$3.5 billion. If the project is economically feasible, does it make sense to fast track this infrastructure before building more public transit, hospitals or roads?



As an interim step, the government could designate the necessary transportation utility corridors (TUCs), then purchase the land. It's been done before. During the 1970s, under former premier Peter Lougheed, the province wisely designated TUCs in key areas that included ring roads around Edmonton and Calgary, storm water management services, major pipelines and electricity transmission lines, and municipal water and sewage services.

The chamber recommends the province secure the land in the next five years to establish the necessary TUCs to build a bullet train network. If it's feasible, we suggest the first phase should link Calgary, Red Deer and Edmonton as the central spine and subsequent phases should connect Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat.

The chamber believes this offers a prudent long-term solution to some of the land use issues encountered by concentrating a number of large facilities in one area, like Strathcona County is experiencing. The land can be designated now, which allows time for meetings with landowners. This prevents costly and divisive hearings later and ensures economic success at a reasonable price.

To prevent boondoggles, it's time for provincial and municipal leaders to make a comprehensive, 20-year TUC plan.

Craigellachie, where Lord Strathcona drove Canada's last spike, is Gaelic for "the rock of alarm." Instead of alarm, that spike built a nation. Imagine what Alberta's golden spike could do for its communities, economy and way of life. It would help weld a provincial powerhouse.