

The Canadian Corridors Project

INTRODUCTION

The School of Public Policy (SPP) at the University of Calgary conducted an extensive multi-year research project, beginning in 2014, investigating the potential for, and challenges to, the development of new infrastructure corridors. The corridors—East, West, and potentially North—would be linked to existing transportation networks to multiply their economic impact, expand opportunities, and deliver a social dividend to all Canadians.

Endorsed by the Senate of Canada in 2016, this work responds to the Council of the Federation's 2019 call for informed discussion of pan-Canadian economic corridors as a key input to strengthening growth across Canada and "a strong, sustainable and environmentally responsible economy."

The Canadian Corridor Project—building on Phases 1 & 2 of the Northern Corridor research—incorporates the work of more than 50 leading academics and subject-matter experts and draws on more than a decade of research and community engagement. Public sessions were held in 18 communities across seven provinces and three territories, as well as 17 virtual roundtables with industry, government, academics and non-governmental organizations.

In 2025, Canadians are far more aware of Canada's declining economic prosperity relative to our country peers; they are more concerned about our economic reliance on the United States; and they are worried about our national security due to a suddenly antagonistic U.S. to the south and a steadily increasing Russian presence to the north.

As U.S. President Donald Trump speculates about Canada as a 51st state and implements punishing tariffs on imports, Canadian political leaders, at all orders of government, are endorsing the idea of pan-Canadian infrastructure corridors for the transportation of energy and other goods. They are seen as a way to (i) help open up interprovincial trade; (ii) diversify our export markets and (iii) enhance our national security, particularly with respect to the North.

Canadians recognize the need for major, creative investments in infrastructure to safeguard and enhance our economic and social prosperity and ensure our national security. What has been lacking to date is the political will and leadership to make it happen. This is a moment for Canadians to make bold decisions, together.

The work conducted by the SPP is timely and invaluable, with in-depth understanding of the potential benefits of, and challenges to, creating such a corridor across many provinces, regions and communities. Much more work is needed, but this knowledge and expertise is a fundamental base from which Canadian decision-makers, now armed with the necessary political will, can get it done.

BY THE NUMBERS

10+Years of study/
engagement**46**Academic
studies published
since 2016**50+**Academics,
authors
and researchers
participated
in program**17**Virtual
roundtables
with governments,
NGOs and industry**18**Northern
Communities
visited for
community
engagement**7,000**Length in
kilometres
of potential
infrastructure
corridors

THE CHALLENGE TO BE SOLVED

The challenge is two-fold:

- Our economy is increasingly less robust than **other countries** in part because of our underdeveloped infrastructure, mostly un-improved for decades. Canada must do better at getting goods efficiently around our country—East, West and increasingly, North—for both internal and export markets. Major challenges include cumbersome, inconsistent and overlapping regulatory regimes, across federal, provincial and territorial jurisdiction; and an inability for proponents to establish the community support/partnerships needed to get projects built.
- Our national security is threatened more now than at any time since the Second World War, and we are sorely un-prepared, particularly in the North. In addition to Trump's rhetoric, Canada's 2024 Defence Strategy **Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defence**, warns of increasing security threats in the Arctic as climate change potentially opens the Northwest Passage and other areas to commercial and strategic ambitions. Major challenges to building the necessary critical infrastructure are the extraordinary costs of building across vast expanses.

THE SOLUTION

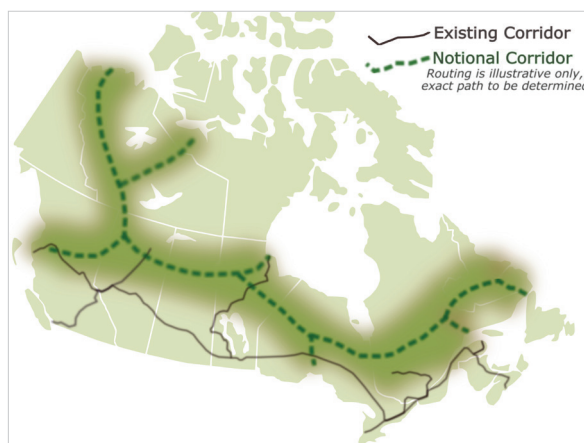
A corridor, an East-West right of way, away from the densely populated and congested southern areas of the country is one solution. A right of way that would be available for critical infrastructure including rail, pipelines, roads, electricity transmission and communications. It would have streamlined regulatory processes with the ability to provide some pre-approvals and enable much faster remaining approvals for construction, achieved with dedicated processes for community engagement.

Although more challenging due primarily to costs and access, corridors could include a right of way for infrastructure to the North, with potential economic benefits of access to new sea routes, and opportunities to reinforce Canadian sovereignty and enhance national security. It would also provide much-needed infrastructure for local communities.

Our national railways constructed in the 19th century, the St. Lawrence Seaway and TransCanada Highway built in the 1950s, were the key initial East-West infrastructure projects that connected the disparate parts of this land to become Canada. We must now build on those successes and do more.

Various proposals for specific East-West infrastructure projects have also largely failed, often due to ad hoc and unsuccessful community engagements and a lack of political will. One exception was the 2024 completion of the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion, which was built on the existing right of way yet was still seriously challenged by regulatory delays and cost overruns.

Potential Northern Infrastructure Corridors in Canada



AREAS OF FOCUS

- Infrastructure and Mobility
- Indigenous Sovereignty
- Climate Change
- Natural Resource Development

RESEARCH THEMES

- Strategic and Trade Dimensions
- Funding and Financing
- Legal and Regulatory
- Organization and Governance
- Geography and Engineering
- Economic Outcomes
- Social Benefits and Costs
- Environmental Impacts

TYPES OF CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

- Energy pipelines
- Electricity transmission lines
- Railways
- Highways
- Seaports
- Airports
- Digital networks
- Environmental Impacts

THE CANADIAN NORTHERN CORRIDOR

The idea of economic corridors to Canada's resource-rich North goes back to Richard Rohmer's idea of a **Mid Canada Development Corridor** in 1967. However, previous efforts have largely failed, for several reasons, including geographic and climate challenges. In 2024, Alberta and the Northwest Territories agreed to collaborate on economic corridor projects, including enhancing critical infrastructure and improving North-South transportation networks. These are piecemeal efforts, however, and to date have not shown significant progress.

The positives include the fact that similar transportation and energy corridors already exist in **Australia** and parts of the **European Union**. Canada can learn from the experiences in these jurisdictions.

EXISTING ISSUES

There are several specific issues the SPP's Canadian Corridor research uncovered:

- **Disincentives to investment:** Companies noted lengthy regulatory processes are a disincentive to investment and specific geographic rights-of-way embedded with predefined clearances would lessen uncertainty and make investing more attractive.
- **Inadequate digital infrastructure:** Reliable, affordable, high-speed broadband internet access is a persistent issue for rural and remote communities across mid- and Northern Canada. There is an immediate priority to digitally connect communities.
- **Deteriorating connective infrastructure:** Non-existing or deteriorating and unsafe roads and highways, safety for commercial and private travel, lack of rail and air connections, fragile energy distribution grids and antiquated water and sewage networks are major issues for communities.
- **Political and social marginalization:** Northern communities say their interests and perspectives are routinely ignored as southern politicians, policymakers and development proponents often fail to account for their unique cultural, economic and environmental contexts.
- **Barriers to inter-jurisdictional collaboration:** When communities, regions, governments and sectors seek to collaborate on shared priorities and goals, efforts are routinely undermined by inter-jurisdictional barriers. These include restrictions on funding sources, which prevents pooling resources across jurisdictional boundaries, even for mutually beneficial projects. Challenges also arise when development and related service delivery spans multiple jurisdictions.
- **Lack of local or regional capacity:** Many jurisdictions lack the financial and logistical capacities, and qualified people, to adequately address their social and infrastructure priorities.
- **Lack of vision:** Communities and stakeholders (including the energy, natural resource and transportation sectors) had difficulty envisioning what a national corridor crossing thousands of kilometres and numerous jurisdictions could look like in practice.
- **Concerns over “blanket approvals”:** Many participants expressed concerns about blanket approvals for infrastructure development at the expense of community needs and environmental concerns.
- **Protecting sovereignty begins with sound infrastructure:** Fully expressing Canadian sovereignty—including providing security and ensuring economic opportunities for all—requires inhabiting Canadian territory. Infrastructure expresses a secure sovereignty and delivers economic opportunity.

OPPORTUNITIES

- **Region-based development:** There was a consensus in the research that region-based development, considering pressing infrastructure needs and infrastructure already in place, would deliver faster results than going through lengthy regulatory processes to receive pre-approvals from all parties.
- **Co-operation and co-ordination:** Researchers concluded infrastructure policy development for mid- and Northern Canada must focus on collaborative approaches that foster co-operation and co-ordination for all involved interest holders, such as government and industry, as well as Indigenous rightsholders and other communities.

- **Appetite for market access and resilient supply chains:** Challenges experienced with global and Canadian supply chains in recent years underline the need for strategic and targeted infrastructure optionality to ensure reliable transportation and access to goods and services.
- **Safeguarding local living standards:** Infrastructure development, focused on transportation and access to services such as health care, is essential to safeguard living standards for future generations.
- **Supply-chain efficiencies:** Governments can prioritize economic policies that increase supply-chain efficiency for export-oriented industry such as port modernization and other infrastructure improvements.
- **Government coordination:** Governments of all levels can make the effort to coordinate and collaborate far more than in the past. As an example, the Council of the Federation could be significantly resourced to enable such coordination and collaboration.

NEXT STEPS

The **Phase 2 Final Report** from the School's extensive work concludes that creating infrastructure corridors in Canada—East, West, near North and North will be challenging, but that they are vitally important to advance Canada's social, economic and national security goals.

The Report urges taking a segmented approach to large scale developments with a focus on projects that local communities see as priorities, such as digital infrastructure, upon which to build other opportunities.

To create a national, pan-Canadian initiative, one critical task will be to manage the often-conflicting objectives of local, provincial, territorial, and federal governments as well as First Nations. A major consideration will be the impact on people and communities where rights-of-ways would be situated and developing social infrastructure along with economic projects.

Another key imperative is that governments at all levels must work to implement effective cross and intergovernmental mechanisms to coordinate and facilitate resource development and infrastructure projects in Canada.

CONCLUSION

The School of Public Policy has already conducted a great deal of research and analysis, over many years, of the need, and potential, for national infrastructure corridors. That research has also highlighted some of the key challenges to building what we need. However, our world in 2025 has changed, and we now see the political will across Canada—federal, provincial, territorial and local—to turn those challenges into opportunities, to learn from the extensive work done to date, and to make something transformative happen for Canada.

Locations of Community Outreach Sessions

