

# NATIONAL POST

## **Troubled brows over bridges: Officials worry rail service to Vancouver's port is vulnerable to a host of problems**

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At least \$250-million will likely be needed to shore up the ageing railway network in B.C.'s Lower Mainland if the Port of Vancouver is to keep up with expected growth, says a new study sponsored by a coalition of government and industry groups.

The report -- to be made public later this week -- identifies key trouble spots in the rail network serving the Port of Vancouver, including the New Westminster Bridge, a century-old structure long overdue for a check-up to determine if it's still safe.

"The question of who is going to pay for all this needs to be discussed," said Bob Wilds, managing director of the Greater Vancouver Gateway Council, whose members include Canadian National Railway Co., the B.C. Transportation Ministry, and Borealis Infrastructure Fund.

Building a new bridge is alone expected to cost about \$110-million.

"The federal government is getting out of providing infrastructure so I don't know what would happen in this situation," Mr. Wilds said.

Vancouver's port is struggling to cope with a massive surge in Asian trade triggered by economic expansion in China that has caused congestion and delays at ports up and down the West Coast.

Economists say the situation is so serious that Canada's economic growth is being hurt.

The study comes as Prince Rupert, on British Columbia's remote northern coast, is mounting a public relations campaign to persuade the federal government to kick in \$40-million for the construction of major new container terminals for its port.

The 91-page Greater Vancouver Gateway Council report, conducted by IBI Group, also points out that two other important Fraser River crossings, at Pitt Meadows and Mission, are also badly in need of repair.

"No matter which way we go, we've got bridges to cross coming into Vancouver, so that's why we're saying if we do the one bridge we should do all of them," Mr. Wilds said.

Most of the problems centre on the railways that carry much of the freight in and out of the port. Observers say companies like Canadian National Railway and CP Rail need to upgrade their tracks to deal with the increased volumes. But the problem is complicated by the fact some of the infrastructure, such as the New Westminster Bridge, is owned by the federal government.

Because of the ageing bridges, the railway network is vulnerable to a host of potential problems, from earthquakes to ship collisions, the report says.

Meanwhile, the system is expected to carry increasing freight volumes as China's economy continues to expand.

The study says one way to avoid replacing the bridges is to persuade the railways in the region to work out track-sharing arrangements, to make more efficient use of the network. If that can happen, the region will be able to handle projected increases in traffic with upgrades to existing infrastructure worth about \$100-million.

CN and CPR have taken steps in that direction and yesterday the former announced an agreement with Burlington Northern.

However, Mr. Wilds said the agreements need to go a lot further.

"How serious the problems are depends on how you deal with them," he said.

On Tuesday, the Vancouver port announced an 11% growth in cargo tonnage last year, up from 8% the previous year.

The sudden wave of new trade has strained the infrastructure not just of Vancouver's port but of the whole transportation system leading into it, especially the railways.

It also helped spark Prince Rupert's plan to build a container terminal of its own to handle the overflow, at a projected cost of about \$180-million.

All the major players in the transportation system around Vancouver are investing in upgrades. The Vancouver port recently unveiled a \$1.4-billion plan to add new container terminals. CPR has said it hopes to invest more than \$100-million in its network and CN is also spending.