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Mid-Canada Boreal Corridor:

Planning for Canada's Future

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About the Author

John van Nostrand



John is the Founding Principal of planningAlliance and affiliated firms regionalArchitects and rePlan. Over the last three decades, he has been the driving force behind the firm's domestic and international planning and urban design practice. John has extensive experience leading large, multi-disciplinary consulting teams on sophisticated architecture and urban development projects across Canada and around the world, including a number of major mine-related housing projects in Africa, Latin America and Canada. He has worked in a wide range of developed and developing countries on the planning, design and construction of new communities ranging in size from 150 to 150,000 persons. John has been widely recognized for his expertise in the planning and design of sustainable housing and community design, as well as transportation and transit infrastructure. His work has been recognized with a number of international and national awards, including the World Leadership Award for Town Planning, Daniel Burnham Award from the American Planning Association, World Habitat Award from UN Habitat, numerous Awards of Excellence from the OAA, RAIC, CIP and OPPI, and many City of Toronto Urban Design Awards. In 2004, John was awarded the Jane Jacobs Award for "Ideas That Matter." John is a Founding Board Member of the Centre for Urban Growth and Renewal as well as a Core Professional on Harvard University's Working Group for Sustainable Cities. He has written and lectured extensively on planning topics in Canada and overseas. He is a Fellow of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada and the Canadian Institute of Planners.



Purpose

This commentary was transcribed from a presentation that John van Nostrand gave on 17 June 2015 at Northern Policy Institute's Policy in a Pub event in Thunder Bay. The editor has adapted some of the text for the sake of structure and narrative.



*“The lack of a **strategic plan** for this corridor is not a recent concern. Retired major general and author **Richard Rohmer** was advancing a vision for its prudent development and population as early as **1968**. Rohmer recognized that this landmass had the potential to be the nation’s **most important economic belt** for the next **50 years**, thus necessitating a strategy for its development.”*

There is, in Canada, a vast landmass that, by and large, is little talked about. It stretches from Newfoundland and Labrador to the Yukon, occupying the area between our nation’s tree line and the most populous swath of our country to the south, where 80 percent of all Canadians reside. It is temperate and habitable, home to 75 percent of our Aboriginal population. It also contains approximately 75 percent of our untapped wealth in terms of minerals and forest products.

This vast, resource-rich landmass is the Mid-Canada Boreal Corridor, and it is the site of significant activity that, for years, has been, and continues to be, a significant contributor to our collective economic prosperity, not to mention Canada’s identity. All of this activity – mining, oil and gas, and forestry – is occurring, it should be noted, in the absence of any plan, federal or provincial, to effectively guide the development of this landmass.

The lack of a strategic plan for this corridor is not a recent concern. Retired major general and author Richard Rohmer was advancing a vision for its prudent development and population as early as 1968, when Pierre Trudeau was Canada’s newly elected prime minister. Rohmer recognized that this landmass had the potential to be the nation’s most important economic belt for the next 50 years, thus necessitating a strategy for its development. A series of conferences followed, but Rohmer was unable to secure Trudeau’s support for such a plan and nothing came of it. Subsequent attempts to revisit the idea have proven equally fruitless.

It was Rohmer’s work that greatly influenced my own writing on this matter, which has, like his original plan, generated considerable interest from politicians and stakeholders, but resulted in little action. Yet activity along the corridor continues to grow at a rapid pace, pretty much ad hoc, with nothing and no one to determine how best to proceed.

To give you some sense of the magnitude of resource extraction activity currently taking place along this corridor, consider that it contains British Columbia’s proposed liquid natural gas facilities, Alberta’s entire oil sands, mining operations in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec, and Newfoundland and Labrador’s offshore oil and gas. The implications of these activities, and how they are conducted, are enormous, starting with our urban centres. From Vancouver to St. John’s, our cities’ fortunes and futures are dependent, in large part, on the continued flow of resources from the Mid-Canada Boreal Corridor. This flow, and the sheer scale of activity occurring, is such that it has made Canada one of the fastest-growing nations in the G8, thus determining our economic outlook. Moreover, it has also served as a magnet for the vast majority of immigrants arriving in our country.

There is a certain degree of irony in the absence of any plan to manage the Corridor’s activity,

migration or growth in a sensible or sustainable manner. After all, Canada has established itself as a leader in terms of financing and investing in resource development around the world – development that is strictly governed by International Finance Corporation guidelines. These rigorous protocols are quite phenomenal in that they require the creation of project plans through community and stakeholder consultations in advance of any resource extraction. Yet you only have to look at the Ontario Mining act amendments of 2009 to see that Canada has a legacy of either relaxing or failing to adopt similar guidelines. This creates an ironic situation where Canadian companies must adhere to stringent consultation and consent requirements with the indigenous populations of nations such as Peru or Senegal, yet are not compelled to apply such standards in a developed nation such as ours.

In light of this disparity, and the considerable importance of the Mid-Canadian Corridor to our nation's prosperity, a single urgent question emerges: what can be done to ensure that the resource extraction occurring along this landmass is conducted in a responsible and sustainable way? The search for a possible solution led me to a precedent from our nation's history: the development of Canada's national railway system.

Long mythologized as an act of nation building, uniting us from east to west, our rail lines were in actual fact constructed for resource extraction – conveying wheat from the prairies to the rest of the country, and beyond. Well before the first spike was driven in Western Canada, the federal Dominion Land Survey was conducted, setting out a clear plan for land use that saw one-square-mile areas allocated



for the purposes of train transportation, settlement and agriculture, among other uses. This enabled the development of infrastructure, with communities and various essential services and conveniences planned around the 10-mile-wide railway corridor. To finance this considerable undertaking, the Dominion Land department hit upon the idea of selling land along the corridor, allocating 10,000 acres for each mile of railroad to the Hudson's Bay Company. Hudson's Bay sold the land to settlers, along with essential goods and services, and it provisioned the building of both the rail lines and various amenities, such as schools.

Rapid growth and extension of infrastructure ensued to the point where, by 1911, wheat producers began advocating for the construction of grain elevators that offered same-day accessibility during harvest season. Elevators and train stops were implemented every eight miles across the prairies, and starter towns began to take shape around them.

These towns became the western Canadian urban communities that we know today. Their growth was highly organized, efficient and driven mainly by the federal government. Thus the notion that the federal government cannot do much to ensure the sensible and sustainable development of the Mid-Canada Boreal Corridor is easily refutable.

But the development we are seeing currently is neither sensible nor sustainable. Consider the mining operations of Northern Alberta. There have been, to date, 36 mine camps established for workers with no consideration given to the impact of these camps over the long term, or for residents in the region. The result is a fly-in-fly-out economy, which is a sharp contrast to the starter towns that developed around wheat extraction.

Such ad hoc developments have not, traditionally, been isolated to Canada. We've seen this phenomenon occur around the world and the outcomes typically have been consistent. Temporary camps that cater solely to the needs of construction workers – food, drink, laundry, entertainment – draw people who cannot afford housing once these workers leave, and they become a haven for all manner of criminal activity. Moreover, these camps have to be rebuilt every six to seven years. The expenses incurred by the companies that build them are considerable and they tend to be subsidized by consumers.

Over the past 20 years, there has been a concerted effort internationally to reverse course and establish operation towns before extracting resources. The result is a normalized urban setting where local populations are engaged in commerce and community building. It's still the exception to the rule, which raises the question as to what we should do with the Mid-Canada Boreal Corridor going forward. It's clear that the first step should be to adopt it as a policy priority. We should build it into our collective narrative and frame the issue in a holistic way, taking all aspects

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of the Corridor into consideration: Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal partnerships, resource extraction and environmental sustainability, jobs and the economy, and infrastructure and housing. Moreover, we should set a standard for meaningful future development not just for Canada, but also for the whole world to adopt.

How do we do this? For one, the federal government must play an active role in the Corridor's development through effective planning and policy that addresses issues such as Aboriginal rights, economic development and resource extraction, environment, infrastructure, housing and social services. We need to set the table for engaging stakeholders, particularly First Nations, in creating a strategy for development. Consultations need to happen at the community, regional, provincial and national level if we are to achieve and promote integrated regional development. These consultations must be top-down and bottom-up, with each sphere informing, and being informed by, the other.

Given that resource economies wax and wane, there is a need to create multiple economies as a counterbalance. These economies should make use of other local or regional resources, provide a cushion against the rise and fall of resource prices, be able to continue following the closure of a mining or oil and gas operation, and align with the Corridor to foster growth.

Local workforce development and immigration is another priority. On-reserve populations are expected to increase 64 percent by 2026 to 667,900 persons, necessitating serious action on education and training to increase Aboriginal labour force participation. At the same time, it's important to direct more immigration to mid-Canada settlement, effectively reducing the dependency of resource extraction activities on fly-in-fly-out populations, not to mention mitigating the social issues such communities tend to create.

Planning for environmental sustainability, safe resource extraction, infrastructure and housing should happen simultaneously, starting with the identification of environmentally significant areas where development cannot happen. Mine planning must be sustainable and infrastructure planning must take housing and related development into consideration. This will facilitate the creation of starter towns that, over time, will evolve into full communities, just as the wheat extraction-related communities founded along our prairies did more than a century ago.

Local, regional, provincial, national and international responsibilities should also be defined. There will be overlap in several instances, as certain issues will require the involvement of more than one level of government, and in some cases – such as infrastructure, housing and social services – participation will be required from all levels.

Finally, we need to foster innovation at every stage of development. We have a responsibility to promote sustainable approaches to planning and building, and to mediate climate change. But we must also consider promoting local and regional businesses and encouraging the mindset that sees being an entrepreneur as a highly desirable path to success and achievement.

With the right leadership to guide the development of this corridor, our remote and underserved geographies can move toward strategic investments in infrastructure. We can provide a flexible plan that allows for population growth. Instead of responding to pressure to accommodate worker influx and the rising demand for, and cost of, housing infrastructure, we can pursue integrated, sustainable strategies that are not only much less costly, but also take into account the long-term role of housing. We can replace single economy dependency and boom-and-bust cycles with diversification and post-closure planning. Land use conflicts will give way to consensual decision-making, and we can minimize the environmental impact by breaking down the silos that determine development.

But above all else, by applying the right leadership to the development of this corridor, we can ensure it remains an engine of economic prosperity and a foundation for a more tangible sense of national unity for the next 50 years and beyond.



About Northern Policy Institute

Northern Policy Institute is Northern Ontario's independent think tank. We perform research, collect and disseminate evidence, and identify policy opportunities to support the growth of sustainable Northern Communities. Our operations are located in Thunder Bay and Sudbury. We seek to enhance Northern Ontario's capacity to take the lead position on socio-economic policy that impacts Northern Ontario, Ontario, and Canada as a whole.

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