

Rhoda Witherly



# New Partnership Will Realize *Transportation Vision*

**O**n November 25, 2003, the province announced that Canadian National Railway (CN) had been chosen as the partner to join with BC Rail in an amalgamation of their rail lines in British Columbia.

“This partnership is a \$1 billion investment in the future of BC. It will provide lower rates, faster service, new transportation infrastructure, new jobs, and new resources for economic development in the North.” With those words, Premier Gordon Campbell consummated a marriage between the provincial railroad and the transcontinental rail line of the CN—a marriage some 100 years in the making.

The partnership will transform the Northern transportation corridor into the second British Columbia gateway on the Pacific. To achieve this transformation, the rail capacity across the North will be increased and the long-dreamed-of container facility for the Port of Prince Rupert will be developed.

On the railway side, CN will purchase new rail cars to increase its capacity to meet the demands of forest-products shippers. They will upgrade some 1500 boxcars to allow for faster transit time and improve car availability. Improvements will be initiated on rates for interline shippers,

including the lowering of Vancouver switching costs. The farmers in the Peace River region will see the re-opening of the Dawson Creek-to-Hythe line, which will facilitate grain handling.

For the terminal facilities, there is an emphasis on developments at the Port of Prince Rupert. The amount of \$17.2 million is committed toward the building of a container terminal at the port. Upgrades will be made to rail lines, tunnels, and terminal trackage to enable the use of double-stack rail cars for efficient container transport. These container plans, combined with the promise of the establishment of the “Chicago Express”—an integrated service to Chicago from Prince George, allowing BC resources faster and more efficient access to the Chicago markets—have communities across the North excited about the opportunities.

The agreement is not just about container and rail developments; it also addresses a range of issues affecting the entire province. Squamish will be able to redevelop its waterfront and downtown core through the transfer of BC Rail’s non-railway lands. Prince George will become the centre for Northern Development Initiatives; increased work will be directed to the Prince George repair and maintenance shop.

A \$15 million First Nations Benefits trust will be established to support economic development for the 25 First

Nations bands whose territory lies along the BC Rail corridor. A \$135 million fund is set aside for sustainable economic development in the North. The fund is to be shared across the region and managed by a board of directors appointed by the province.

Tourism is not forgotten; the expansion of tourist train opportunities in both Squamish and Prince Rupert is expected.

The integration of the provincial railroad into a transcontinental system has been a much-discussed topic over the past 100 years. Successive Premiers tried to sell, give away, and close down the provincial railroad, with varying degrees of success.

The dream of a second transcontinental railroad began with the election of Sir Wilfred Laurier in 1896. By 1902 the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway (GTP)—under the leadership of Charles Hayes—was born, complete with government backing for the GTP bonds to be used to finance the project.

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In 1905 Kaien Island was chosen as the terminus for the new railway; planning for the new town of Prince Rupert was begun. Railroad fever was gripping all of Canada. The 1909 British Columbia election was fought and won on a platform of endorsing the contract between the province and the Canadian Northern Pacific project for a railroad to Vancouver and Vancouver Island.

In 1910 Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier visited the newly built northern terminus of the GTP at Prince Rupert and declared, "I have no doubt that someday Prince Rupert is destined to be one of the very great cities of the North American continent."

Railroad construction continued unabated. In BC yet another railway began. This time it was the BC Central Railway; it had plans to lay rail to Lillooet by 1911 and then on to Prince George. In 1912 Premier McBride announced the province would assist in the amalgamation of the existing BC Central Railway and the Pacific Great Eastern Railroad, as they worked to build the line to Prince George

to meet the GTP line going from Edmonton across to Prince Rupert. The amalgamated railroad was to be a separate entity and operate independently of the existing transcontinental lines.

BC Rail was born but, by 1913, the boom was beginning to fade. Provincial politicians were already looking for ways to divest themselves of the railroad they had just created.

Over the years, successive premiers made overtures to the then-CNR and the federal government in an attempt to sell or transfer the railroad—all to no avail. A Royal Commission investigated the line in 1923; committees of the Provincial Legislature recommended various solutions but, through it all, the railroad remained firmly entrenched as a subsidized provincial railroad. With the onset of WWII, discussions about the potential sale of the provincial railroad abated.

By 1952 the provincial railroad dream had been revived; BC Rail finally reached Prince George. Premier W. A. C. Bennett incorporated the rail line into his vision for an expanded North; he pushed the line

into McKenzie and surveyed the route known as the Dease Lake extension.

The grand vision of expansion did not survive Premier W. A. C. Bennett. Financial pressures and the expanding Port of Vancouver effectively pulled the traffic, leaving BC Rail and the northern rail line as an overflow residual line.

Now in 2004 the new partnership between the CN and BC Rail brings us full circle. The dream of Wilfred Laurier and Charles Hayes—a second gateway to the Orient on the BC coast, linked with the transcontinental rail and the north-south route across the province—becomes reality.

People across the North are optimistic that this partnership will help revive the northern economy and that the dreams and plans of our past will finally be realized. ▲

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