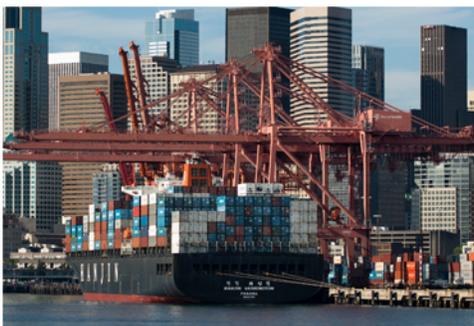


# GREAT NORTHERN

CORRIDOR COALITION



## Final Report

### Great Northern Corridor SWOT Analysis Phase 2

September 29, 2016

*Prepared for the Great Northern Corridor Coalition*

*Prepared by the Olsson Associates Team*

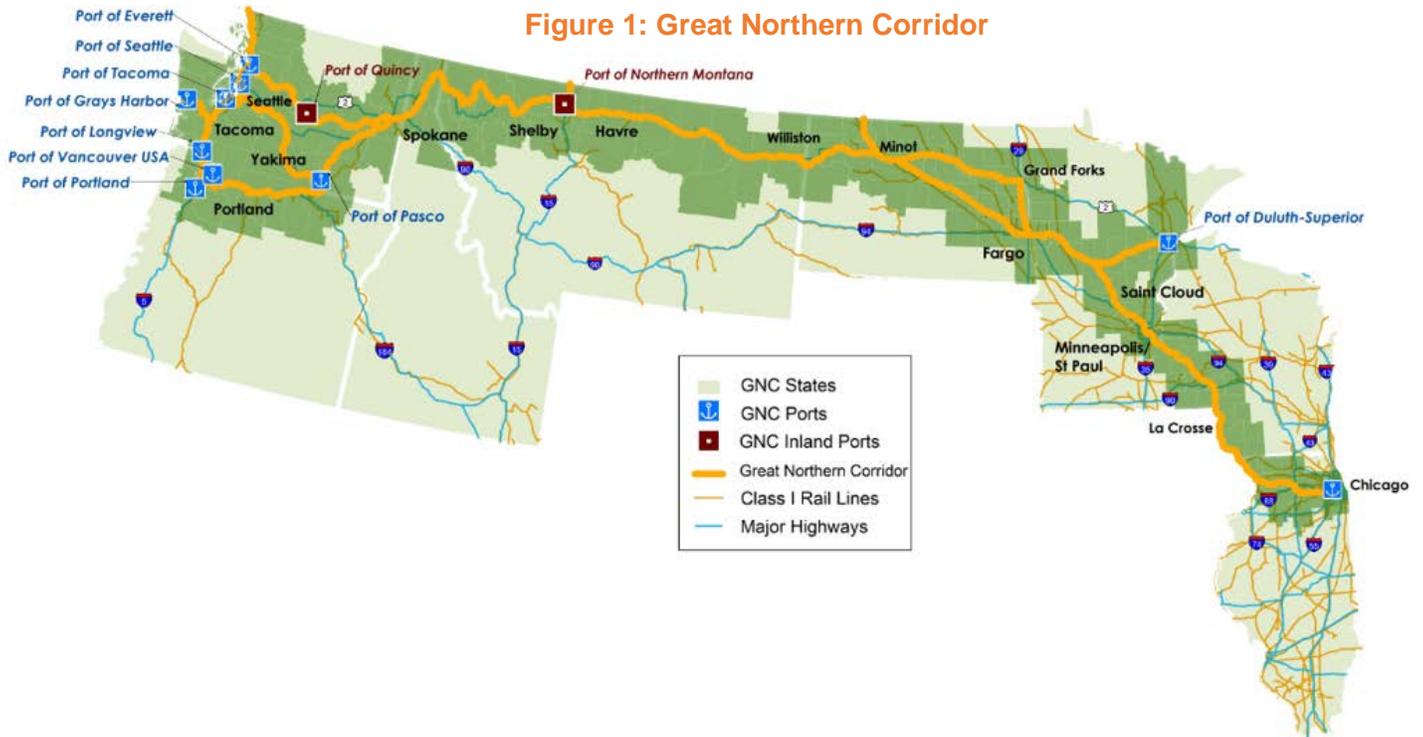


### Table of Contents

Table of Contents .....	i
Introduction.....	1
The Challenge:.....	1
The Solution:.....	1
Member Benefits.....	2
History .....	2
Creating a Sustainable GNC Coalition.....	3
Full Membership .....	3
Associate Members .....	3
Friends of the Coalition .....	4
Governance .....	4
GNC Phase 2 SWOT Findings / Recommendations .....	4
GNC Modal Integration and Facilitating North American Trade .....	5
GNC's Role in Supporting Cross Border Trade with Canada .....	7
Initiatives to Advance Opportunities and Address Weaknesses .....	8
Grade Crossing Safety and Mobility .....	8
Environmental Planning / Sustainability .....	10
Unified Corridor Investment .....	11
Project Advancement .....	12
Federal Funding Guidance.....	13
Environmental Requirements .....	14
Next Steps.....	15

### Introduction

The Great Northern Corridor (GNC) stretches from Chicago to the ports on the Pacific Northwest Coast. This multimodal corridor consisting of highways, rail and ports. It represents an east-west artery of commerce that supports the movement of people and goods, bringing economic vitality to more than 35 million Americans across eight North Central and Pacific Northwestern states. This corridor includes thousands of manufacturers, ranchers, farmers, miners, timber and lumber businesses, energy companies and travelers that rely upon the multimodal transportation options that are provided by the corridor. Recently, the GNC was identified at the federal level as an example of the importance of rail corridors in maintaining connectivity for both freight and passengers on the national rail network.



**The Challenge:** Since the nineteenth century this interconnected network has been an engine of growth and economic development, but modern times bring modern challenges. As aging infrastructure strains under tightening capacity across all modes, so too are tightening budgets for families, companies, and governments straining under the burden of maintenance and expansion needs even as political, environmental, and land use obstacles accumulate. While this situation is by no means unique to the Great Northern Corridor, this Corridor faces distinctive geographic, economic, and transportation needs which will require its own focused approach.

**The Solution:** The formation of a formal coalition that brings together various stakeholders, identifying areas for mutual benefit and cooperation, and executes on opportunities to improve freight transportation options in a cost effective and sustainable

way. By working together, this coalition will offer leadership to provide mobility improvements across and within the Great Northern Corridor in order to bring economic prosperity to our stakeholders.

### Member Benefits

The GNC Coalition provides a corridor-wide focus to achieve improved mobility of goods between the eight states and international destinations for the benefit of all members.

Services and products include:

- Corridor-wide project prioritization and advancement
- Applicant for federal discretionary grant programs: FASTLANE, TIGER
- Unified advocate on corridor freight matters and projects
- Information sharing: best practices.
- Public and stakeholder education
- Support to smaller communities along the corridor – project advancement, etc.
- Serve as “trusted advisor” and partner on issues impacting the corridor
- Advancement of economic development benefits in the corridor
- Research

### History

In January of 2012, the Montana Department of Transportation—acting as lead agency for a coalition of public and private interests (the GNC Coalition) with the common goal of planning for the future of the GNC as seamless multimodal system to support commerce and economic development—submitted a grant application to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Multistate Corridor Operations and Management (MCOM) Program. The grant application requested funding to initiate a multimodal planning project along a corridor stretching from Chicago to the Pacific Northwest. The grant application outlined a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis to be conducted in Phase 1 of the corridor planning effort. The Phase 1 planning effort established a coalition website (<http://greatnortherncorridor.org>) and completed several baseline reports including a multimodal corridor assets inventory, an examination of freight flows in the corridor, an examination of the corridor’s influence on the economy and environment, and an assessment of the corridor’s SWOTs. Phase 1 of the study concluded in mid-2015.

Much of the focus in Phase 1 centered on the importance of the multimodal GNC corridor in supporting rural and urban economies that depend on the corridor for freight transportation to regional, national, and international markets. The GNC intersects counties along the corridor with high concentrations of businesses, including both urban and rural areas. The research in Phase 1 demonstrated that this corridor serves as an economic engine for its member states, its cities, regional economies, and the nation. The corridor provides a critical connection to move people that support many local businesses and personal mobility.

A second MCOM grant was received, and during 2015-16, the GNC Coalition embarked on a Phase 2 study effort. Phase 2 of the study expanded the research on some key trends and issues identified in Phase 2, and took steps to establish and implement a business

model and several programmatic initiatives to create a sustainable coalition moving forward in the future. This executive summary summarizes the work completed and findings from this study, while also addressing the future of the GNC Coalition.

### Creating a Sustainable GNC Coalition

The GNC Coalition provides a corridor-wide focus to achieve improved mobility of goods between the eight states and international destinations for the benefit of all members. A due structure will be set in place for each level of membership consisting of cash and/or in-kind contributions. Services and products of the GNC Coalition include:

*For more information, see the white paper "GNC Creating a Sustainable Organization"*

- Corridor-wide project prioritization and advancement
- Applicant for federal discretionary grant programs: FASTLANE, TIGER
- Unified advocate on corridor freight matters and projects
- Information sharing: best practices.
- Public and stakeholder education
- Support to smaller communities along the corridor – project advancement, etc.
- Serve as “trusted advisor” and partner on issues impacting the corridor
- Advancement of economic development benefits in the corridor
- Research

### Full Membership

Full membership in the GNC Coalition will be granted to:

- The Departments of Transportation of the states of Idaho, Illinois, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, Washington, and Wisconsin
- All public port districts duly organized and existing under the laws of Idaho, Illinois, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, Washington, or Wisconsin
- All Metropolitan Planning Organizations, located along the Corridor, and duly organized and existing under the laws of Idaho, Illinois, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, Washington, or Wisconsin
- BNSF Railway
- Current members not included in the preceding organizational categories

Other business associations, transportation and logistics service providers, and other organizations involved in transportation, logistics, international or domestic trade, or related areas may apply for full membership.

### Associate Members

Individuals, business firms, industry associations and other organizations with a bona fide interest in the aims and goals of the GNCC may be accepted as Associate Members, where they can participate in meetings but shall not be eligible to vote.

### Friends of the Coalition

Finally, any business, organization, or individual may become a Friend of the GNC Coalition where they will receive newsletters and other communications from the GNC Coalition, however, they shall not be able to participate in any meetings nor be able to vote on any issues before the membership.

### Governance

The GNC Coalition will be governed by an Executive Board, consisting of five senior members of the full membership. The Executive Board will direct the Executive Director who is responsible for managing the day-to-day implementation of the organization's business plan as well as participating in the Steering Committee that oversees various committees of the GNC Coalition, including:

- Membership Committee
- Funding and Advocacy Committee
- Projects Committee
- Programs Committee
- Communications Committee
- Economic Development Committee

## GNC Phase 2 SWOT Findings / Recommendations

*For more information, see the white paper "GNC SWOT Analysis"*

The GNC SWOT Analysis - Phase 1 was largely a fact finding study that: 1) Developed a baseline inventory of this multimodal corridor; 2) Identified key commodities and markets supported by the corridor; 3) Analyzed the economic and environmental impacts of the corridor; and, 4) Conducted a forward looking examination of investment needs, market opportunities, and overarching threats to the corridor. It is safe to say that the findings and conclusions of Phase 1 raised as many questions as it did answers.

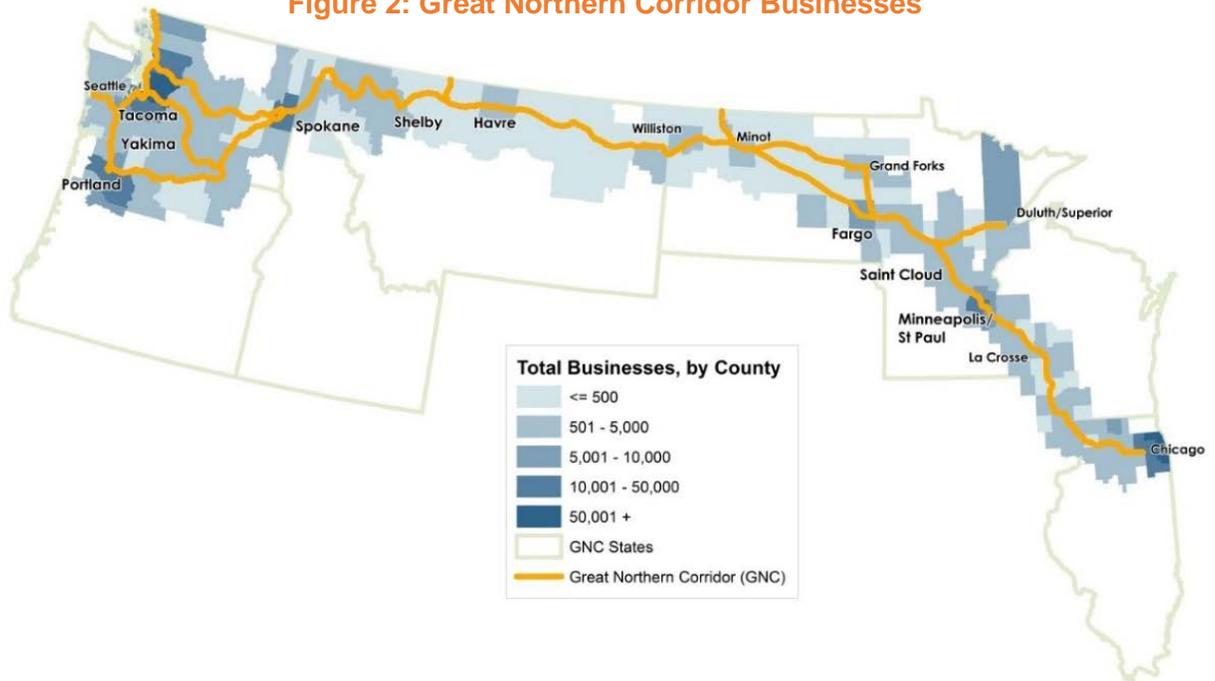
Among the questions the coalition wished to explore in Phase 2 were the relevance of the diverse coalition formed to plan for the GNC's future and how this coalition would function going forward. Coalition members also wanted to explore more specifically the interdependency of the modes that form the corridor, the role that the GNC plays in facilitating/supporting North American trade, and what steps could be taken to address the needs and threats identified in Phase 1.

The question of GNC Coalition relevance has been addressed in a business planning effort previously discussed. This report summarizes how the major freight modes in the corridor interact to support North American trade, and provides guidance on steps the coalition can take to address identified threats and capitalized on identified opportunities. While Phase 2 made strides to address many of the questions resulting from the study and planning in Phase 1, expanding the study also raises additional questions. Additional information and a more detailed analysis can be found on the GNC website ([www.greatnortherncorridor.org](http://www.greatnortherncorridor.org)).

### GNC Modal Integration and Facilitating North American Trade

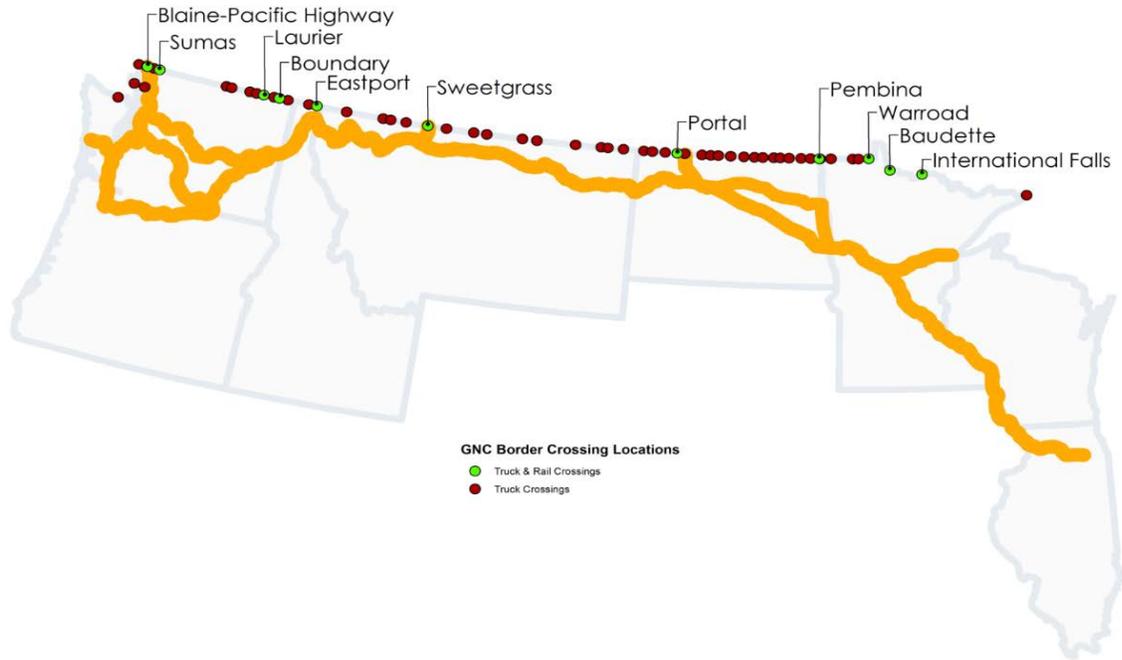
The GNC is an artery of transportation and commerce across northern states forming an important trade conduit between the Midwest and Pacific Northwest. While the GNC parallels the Canadian border across its entire length, intersecting roadways and rail lines facilitate the exchange of goods and services with Canada, our largest trading partner. In 2014, Canada was the top export and the top import market for six of the eight Great Northern Corridor Coalition (GNCC) states. In 2014, the GNCC states exported more than \$54 billion in merchandise to Canada and imported over \$91 billion in merchandise from Canada.

**Figure 2: Great Northern Corridor Businesses**



As of 2014, there were 54 ports of entry across the international border, from Washington to Minnesota, reporting commercial trade activity: Washington (15), Idaho (2), Montana (12), North Dakota (18), and Minnesota (7).

Figure ES-3: Great Northern Corridor Ports of Entry



Broadly, the GNC appears to have adequate capacity to facilitate cross border trade with Canada: Fifty-four individual border crossing gateways were identified and mapped across the five GNC Coalition states that share a common border with Canada. However:

The analysis of border crossings across the GNC found that the flow of goods between GNC border states and Canada is highly centralized with more than 90 percent of all trade by value taking place at five specific gateways:

- Pembina, North Dakota
- Blaine, Washington
- Sweet Grass, Montana
- Portal, North Dakota
- Sumas, Washington

Each of these top border crossing is served by both highway and railway facilities. Of the five, three (Pembina, Blaine, and Sweet Grass) are served by north/south Interstate highway facilities, the only three Interstate highway facilities that extend to the Canadian border in the corridor.

- Information about border crossing delays, or wait-times, at crossings in the GNC were available for only selected highway crossing facilities. Travel time data was available at four of the highest value crossings in the GNC: Pembina, Blaine, Sweet Grass, and Sumas. At these four crossings the average travel time per mile for inbound trucks was 5.5 minutes per mile. For outbound traffic the average travel time was 4.1 minutes per mile. Both averages were higher than the average for non-GNC U.S./Canadian border

crossings. In 2014, delays to trucks using these four facilities is conservatively estimated at more than 4 million minutes, or nearly 75,000 hours.

- Over the past five years, the growth in trade moving through highway border crossings at these five facilities grew 16 percent. During the same time, trade moving by rail through these five gateways declined by one-half percent.
- By value the largest commodity groups flowing bi-laterally across the border include mineral fuels, electrical machinery, automobiles, plastics, wood, and machinery related to utilities, appliances, farm equipment, and internal combustion engines. Many of these top commodity groups are often associated with rail or intermodal transport, however some of these commodity groups saw declines in movement by rail; and the directional flow of goods moving on rail across the border is dominated by imports resulting in a negative trade balance by rail. The export value for highway crossings is nearly double the value of imports.
- When stakeholders in the corridor were asked about primary markets, domestic regions were the most common response, and Canada was the top international market response. When asked about barriers to accessing some markets, the problems mentioned by shippers ranged from issues with interconnecting rail carriers, to truck size and weight differences between jurisdictions, to the overall cost effectiveness of using various modes.
- The American Transportation Research Institute's (ATRI) analysis of truck origins and destinations using intermodal facilities in the GNC found that with a few exceptions, trucks coming into or leaving rail/highway, marine port/highway, or airport/highway interchanges of freight, are not crossing the border with Canada. Exceptions to those finding are:
  - Nearly six percent of the trucks leaving the rail intermodal yard in Spokane ended their trip in either British Columbia or Alberta
  - Fifty percent of the trucks leaving the Port of Northern Montana ended their trip in Canada. The Port of Northern Montana showed by far the greatest integration of international trade flows with an intermodal facility in the corridor.
  - Fourteen percent of the trucks leaving Grays Harbor had a destination in British Columbia.

### ***GNC's Role in Supporting Cross Border Trade with Canada***

Through the border crossing freight analysis, several opportunities and recommendations were identified to support and enhance cross border trade with Canada:

1. **Recommendation: Marketing corridor facilities to support trade with Canada could be a significant opportunity for the future of the corridor coalition.** While trade with Canada is an important economic catalyst for the economies of GNC members, there is no compelling evidence that the GNC acts as a significant facilitator for cross border trade. The Phase 1 SWOT analysis documented the importance of Canada as an economic partner to GNC Coalition members. A closer examination of the data however suggests that little of the east-west commodity flows in the GNC are diverted off or integrated into the flow of goods between GNC states and Canada. From a modal perspective, highways carry the majority of cross

border freight, even though the highest value highway gateways result in significant time costs to industry. More concerning may be the finding that less than one-quarter of the exports through the five busiest gateways across the corridor are moving by rail. This trade deficit in rail flows, and the potential implication that U.S. exporters seem to choose rail options less frequently than their Canadian counterparts, could have many reasons including the different product and supply chain attributes of exports versus imports. However, it could also be related to available access to rail services and equipment. While it was hoped that interviews with shippers in the corridor would help shed light on mode choice decisions for various markets, most shippers were reluctant to discuss specifics about their use of a mode in a particular market. It is recommended that the GNC Coalition conduct additional market research regarding why intermodal facilities located in the corridor are not being integrated into cross border trade is needed.

- 2. Recommendation: The busiest cross border highway gateways in the GNC appear to be congested and future trends in travel time should be monitored closely.** Data to analyze border crossing times is spotty and has been available from USDOT only occasionally and for specific sites. However, at the four highway border crossings in the corridor for which data was available, the average travel time per mile was significantly higher than it was for non-GNC/Canadian border crossings where data was available. It is recommended that these crossings be monitored and enhancements identified to reduce congestion as appropriate.
- 3. Recommendation: The GNC Coalition should conduct a study to examine the impact on regional economies and international trade from a new Interstate highway and border gateway located between I-5 in Western Washington and I-15 in Central Montana.** It is noteworthy that only three Interstate highway facilities exist in the portion of the GNC that has a common border with Canada. Several years ago, states in the Southwest part of the U.S. petitioned Congress to authorize a new Interstate highway facility, Interstate 11. It has been proposed that U.S. 93 between Phoenix and Las Vegas be upgraded to Interstate standards. US-93 continues north to the Canadian border where it crosses into British Columbia from Western Montana.

### Initiatives to Advance Opportunities and Address Weaknesses

In Phase 2 of the GNC SWOT Analysis, coalition members wanted additional attention given to the two most common threats identified in Phase 1 and the most consistently identified opportunity through the development of three programmatic corridor-wide initiatives: (1) Grade Crossing Safety; (2) Environmental Planning; and (3) Unified Investment.

#### ***Grade Crossing Safety and Mobility***

The Corridor Coalition recognizes the importance of rail transportation's role in a growing economy. The Coalition members also acknowledge the concerns of increasing rail traffic on the communities adjacent to the Corridor. These concerns include noise, lighting and air quality, and safety and congestion impacts at rail at-grade crossings. As both road and rail

traffic volumes increase, it is likely public concerns regarding this traffic will also grow. A number of public interest groups are calling for action to improve the safety of trains, especially those transporting crude oil and other hazardous materials. These groups and broader public perceptions of railroad safety present a significant threat to the future of crude oil related commerce in the GNC.

4. **Recommendation: Adopt safety and mobility at highway/railway intersections as an additional GNC Coalition goals and incorporate into the GNC Mission.** Moving forward, grade crossing safety and mobility could be a catalyst for maintaining and growing the coalition. The GNC is currently the primary conduit for crude oil moving out of the Bakken Region of North Dakota and Eastern Montana. Since 2014 the movement of crude oil by rail has declined, but in a 2014 study, Minnesota noted that oil originating in the Bakken Basin had increased train volumes through the state by 5-7 additional trains per day. The hazardous nature of Bakken crude oil has been the subject of concern for states and local communities in the GNC. Currently safety is not addressed in the coalition's mission statement or goals.
5. **Recommendation: Establish a central repository for grade crossing data in the corridor.** Establishing a crossing database for evaluating and prioritizing corridor grade crossing projects could be a central theme for the coalition members to help address public concerns with at-grade crossing impacts in their communities.
6. **Recommendation: Build on the expansion of grade crossing evaluation factors by monitoring similar initiatives at the state and federal level.** The analysis to identify available data sources for expanding the evaluation of grade crossing projects to include broader environmental, economic and community livability factors is a good basis for improving the crossing evaluations process. As other studies are completed—such as NCHRP 25-50 *Prioritization Procedure for Proposed Road-Rail Grade Separation Projects along Specific Rail Corridors* and the *Washington State Joint Transportation Commission Study of Road-Rail Conflicts in Cities (2016)*—the factors and calculations under these other initiatives should be reviewed and updated as appropriate.
7. **Recommendation: Add weight factors to the grade crossing evaluation methodology in order to give certain factors more importance.** The evaluation method developed in Phase 2 does not include any weighting scheme to give preference to any individual evaluation factor nor does it introduce weighting to any of the evaluation categories as a whole.<sup>1</sup>
8. **Recommendation: Develop a tiered list of grade crossing projects using, in part, the prioritization methodology.** This tiered list, or groupings, of grade

---

<sup>1</sup> A White Paper produced as an element of Phase 2 work, suggests evaluation methodology for grade separation prioritization that references more than 20 potential evaluation factors across four categories: 1) Safety, 2) Environmental, 3) Economic, and 4) Community Livability.

crossing projects would provide focus for the coalition in the advocacy for funding and implementation of grade crossing improvements.

### ***Environmental Planning / Sustainability***

Phase 2 provided a screening-level environmental analysis to assist GNC Coalition members when preparing and submitting potential TIGER and/or FASTLANE grant applications. This was due, in part, to the recognition that the GNC Coalition itself may become a project sponsor in the future. The analysis covered three areas:

- Types of projects that are likely to require categorical exclusions, environmental assessments (EA), environmental impact statements (EIS), or “tiered” National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documents for related projects to speed the NEPA process
- Screening potential projects for FASTLANE or TIGER suitability and NEPA needs
- NEPA considerations for multi-jurisdictional projects, which may provide grant application benefits

The environmental “hot spots” analyzed for the GNC provide a high-scale understanding of potential environmental authorization and permitting that could be required for projects along and within the GNC. Three environmental resources; 1) federal and state lands, 2) Native American Tribal Lands, and 3) critical habitat, in particular, occur most predominantly along the GNC, specifically in the western portion of the corridor. These resources are prevalent and overlap one another within the corridor, likely creating the need for additional authorization and permitting for specific projects. These environmental resources would typically trigger requirements for environmental coordination and consultation with various federal and state agencies and would need to be considered when planning projects. In contrast, some environmental issues such as air quality non-attainment might benefit from projects that reduce congestion or greenhouse gas emissions.

9. **Recommendation: Future coalition building activities of the GNC as a planning and investment entity should seek to consult with and include federal, state, and tribal governments.** The specifics of adverse or beneficial impacts, the need for authorizations or permits, as well as the level of consultation and coordination with agencies that is required all depend on the specifics of the project. Once a specific project is identified the geographic area of potential impacts can be refined and environmental resources that are potentially affected can be fully analyzed at a much smaller scale than this initial review of potential environmental “hot spots.” Given the prevalent environmental resources in the corridor, the GNC Coalition may wish to examine a longer-term strategy for consulting with various government agencies and Native American tribes in the corridor. As the business plan for the corridor evolves, the membership of the coalition will likely evolve as well. Having representatives that can help the coalition navigate environmental and sustainability issues could become another element of the value proposition for the coalition.

### ***Unified Corridor Investment***

In recent years many state and federal studies have all reached the same conclusion: available funding resources are falling behind in making needed transportation investments. In a multimodal corridor more than 3,300 miles long, there are many investment needs and many competing entities for limited state, federal, and private sector resources. A compelling reason for forming the GNC Coalition is: *“to promote regional cooperation, planning, and shared project implementation for research programs and projects to improve multimodal transportation system management and operations.”*

To achieve this goal, completing priority GNC projects is likely to require the creation and adoption of a corridor investment strategy.

During a March 2016 meeting of the GNC Coalition in Portland, Oregon, members acknowledged the inherent difficulty of getting many diverse entities to reach consensus in support of specific projects. However, it must also be acknowledged that forming coalitions to identify investments that provide the greatest utility to the broadest number of stakeholders has been encouraged by federal appropriators and is a primary reason that the GNC Coalition was formed. The following recommendations then are provided to help the GNC Coalition move toward achieving greater success in gaining funding through competitive federal grant programs and identifying corridor investments that provide the greatest utility to the GNC Coalition:

10. **Recommendation: Identify a core set of GNC performance measures to reflect metrics that have driven successful funding solutions at the national level and align with the FAST Act.** The selection and adoption of coalition performance measures can be one method to demonstrate the value of GNC Coalition projects in the national arena. (A secondary consideration for metrics is to provide safety and operational performance data for the three major modes; highway, rail, and water that would address concerns of communities and businesses in the corridor).
11. **Recommendation: Identify coalition resources to collect and display the selected performance measures in a dashboard on the GNC Coalition’s website.** Providing performance data on the GNC website can illustrate the progress being made toward coalition goals and safety. In the short term, a performance measures tab can be added to the GNC Coalition’s website to showcase benefits defined in Phase 1 such as:
  - a. 2012 Modal (share both tons and value)
  - b. 2012 Commodity Mix
  - c. 2012 versus 2040 forecasts
12. **Recommendation: Show completed projects on the website as well as highlight coalition projects such as those projects that are under construction as well as mature projects that are in the process of securing final funding.** The coalition should review evaluation criteria for projects to ensure alignment between coalition priorities and criteria and the goals of the USDOT. Integrating priorities should offer more opportunities to successfully obtaining federal funding for the coalition’s priority investment projects. The GNC website should be used to the

greatest extent possible to market the value of the coalition and make the case for investment.

13. **Recommendation: Participate as a coalition in proposed rulemakings at the federal level.** The coalition should consider submitting comments by August 2016 on Subpart F: Measures to Assess Freight Movement on the Interstate System. Consider a joint funding approach similar to one used by members of the FAST Corridor (<http://www.psrc.org/transportation/freight/fast>) to fund projects, where funds can be shifted from one project to another due to delays.
14. **Recommendation: Submit a funding application as a coalition.** As the coalition becomes more familiar and established, a long term goal could be the preparation and submittal of a GNC Coalition application seeking federal funding for a group of four to six corridor projects under new funding opportunities such as NSFHP discretionary grant program (FASTLANE) that has become available under the FAST Act.
15. **Recommendation: Consider self-supporting funding mechanisms in the long term.** Over time the coalition may wish to consider the idea of creating a joint funding approach using the FAST Corridor as an example. This process might be initiated through the execution of Memorandums of Understanding to gain cooperation on ITS and other operational improvements corridor-wide.
16. **Recommendation: Join forces with other coalitions with similar goals.** The GNC Coalition may also wish to examine a joint-venture of this nature with the Northwest Passage Corridor which extends from Minnesota to Washington for the purpose of improving highway operations on the I-90 / I-94 corridors.
17. **Recommendation: Use performance standard to identify corridor-wide priority projects.** The GNC Coalition should consider corridor-wide endorsement of key projects that would have clear impacts on overall corridor operations. A first step toward achieving this recommendation would be the establishment of threshold values for performance improvements that could be applied to project applications to identify those projects worthy of corridor-wide support.

## Project Advancement

More than 230 potential projects were identified by the GNC Coalition that fell within the boundaries of the GNC. Those projects were further divided by the project type and the potential NEPA clearance that would be required. The project types included:

- Economic development
- Community impact and safety improvements
- First/last mile improvements
- Rail capacity enhancements

By identifying potential projects, the GNC Coalition can begin to strategize on the pursuit of federal grants and the level of environmental clearances that are either required or

anticipated for each project. As funding opportunities present themselves, the GNC Coalition may evolve to be a project sponsor over time and directly submit projects for funding.

### Federal Funding Guidance

One of the overarching goals of the GNC Coalition is to bring additional project funding to the multimodal corridor to improve safety, remove bottlenecks and enhance freight mobility along the corridor.

*For more information, see the white paper "GNC Federal Funding Guidance"*

The Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) competitive grant program – (See more at: <https://www.transportation.gov/tiger#sthash.G9PpyXHd.dpuf>) was created in 2009 by U.S. Senate Appropriations. A new category of competitive freight grants was created with the passage of the FAST Act in 2015: *Fostering Advancements in Shipping and Transportation for the Long-term Achievement of National Excellence (FASTLANE)* grant program.

Following a review of successful grant applications within the GNC Coalition states, several clear recommendations for future applications can be developed.

#### **Successful applications:**

- Excite the reviewers
- Are easy to read and understand
- Have a strong rationale & objectives that fit program priorities
- Identify the challenge with facts and figures and define the solution that the implementation of the project will offer
- Contain a concise project description
- Clearly stated hypotheses- problem statement and proposed solutions
- Clear objectives and expected outcomes/impacts for the project. (What will be different as a result of the proposed work?)
- Have specific objectives that are in alignment with the funding opportunity
- Have a clear work plan with clear timelines, included schedule and budget summaries.
- Have communicated importance of project on the local and national economies
- Have a discussion of expected outcomes with defined performance metrics
- Address potential risks, including risk mitigation plans

#### **Preparation before a Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) is posted:**

- Build a project library with all the project documents, graphics, pictures, maps, etc.
- Develop the financial plan, get funding commitments from local sponsors
- Identify project partners, send them a draft support letter for their review
- Build a project website
- Market your project to your local citizens, stakeholders, legislators and federal delegation

- Draft a 1-page overview of the project
- Draft a strawman application using a prior NOFA as guidance
- Prepare an Application Template – blocking out every section that is required by the NOFA
- Identify missing data, collect that data
- Prepare graphics for your project and add them to your project library and website

### ***Developing the Proposal:***

- Read the NOFA
- Refine a phase of project to fit within program priorities
- Verify eligibility- call funding agency for clarification
- Fully consider relevance, review criteria
- Write project description for the particular program, reviewers, review process, *etc.*
- Describe all elements if project is phased
- Complete all paperwork, get signatures
- Double check the grant NOFA requirements to ensure the application has all required elements
- Have it reviewed by colleagues that are not familiar with the project as well as colleagues that understand the project but did not write the application
- Cross check all exhibits against the narrative to verify consistency
- Submit the applications a couple of days early

### ***Improving the Proposal:***

- Obtain a successful proposal from a successful colleague
- Review abstracts of recently funded projects in the programs of interest
- Obtain critical reviews from colleagues before you submit

### ***Other advice:***

- Request reviews of the application / project. USDOT will discuss the project and its eligibility in the time period between the NOFA's release and the submittal deadline.
- If the project is not funded, ask for a debrief conference- to ask agency staff: Why the project was not funded? What rating the application got on the previous review? Where the application can be improved? Then, use the next few months to improve the application/ refine the project in preparation for resubmittal in the next funding round. Traditionally, TIGER awardees succeed on their fourth submittal, assuming each submittal shows progress toward construction and further development of the project partnerships, outreach etc.

## Environmental Requirements

In order to be eligible for TIGER discretionary grants, each applicant must detail the benefits their project would deliver for five long-term outcomes: safety, economic competitiveness, state of good repair, quality of life and environmental sustainability. These benefits are captured in the required Benefit-Cost

*For more information, see the white paper "GNC NEPA Considerations"*

Analysis required for TIGER applications. Environmental sustainability includes the environmental benefits from reduced emissions; transportation projects that reduce congestion can reduce emissions and produce environmental benefits given reduced idling and other wise constant vehicle-miles travelled. Also transportation projects that encourage transportation users to shift from more-polluting modes to less-polluting modes can similarly reduce emissions. Applicants claiming these types of benefits must clearly demonstrate and quantify how the project will reduce emissions. Once an applicant has adequately quantified levels of emission reductions, it should estimate the dollar value of these benefits. Additionally, applicants should consider external costs, such as environmental pollutants resulting from the use of the facility or related changes in usage on other facilities in the same network in the analysis.

In addition, all projects applying for a TIGER grant must comply with National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements. NEPA is a procedural statute that requires Federal agencies to consider the environmental impacts of their actions. At the time of application for a TIGER grant, the NEPA process must be substantially completed in order to demonstrate compliance with Federal, State, and local requirements. Applicants should include completed NEPA documents for the transportation element of the project, or drafts of NEPA documents with discussion of the status of the NEPA review and any approved permits. NEPA requirements vary depending on the project and could include Categorical Exclusion (done for projects that have been determined through experience to not have significant effects on the environment); Environmental Assessment (completed when impacts of a proposed project are unknown and may result in a Finding of No Significant Impact [FONSI] or an Environmental Impact Statement); or Environmental Impact Statement (which is a comprehensive accounting of the impacts of a proposed project that results in a Record of Decision [ROD]).

Similar to the TIGER grants, project applying for FASTLANE grants must also follow NEPA requirements. The NEPA documents/process do not need to be completed prior to application for the FASTLANE grant, but the application should provide a schedule that clearly demonstrates the timeframe for completion of environmental review activities that need to be completed before the start of construction for the project and any risks for meeting the projected timeframe. The Department will not authorize or obligate FASTLANE funds for construction, final design, or right-of-way acquisition until NEPA is complete.

## Next Steps

With the completion of the Phase II SWOT Analysis for the GNC, the GNC Coalition is set to embark on a sustainable path that embodies its mission statement to *“Promote a premier multi-state corridor by acting collectively to promote public policy, research, and multimodal infrastructure development that expands commerce and enhances safety on the corridor.”* Opportunities exist, and will present themselves in the future, for the GNC Coalition to influence and promote grade crossing safety/mobility issues, support a Unified Corridor Investment Program and participate in corridor-wide initiatives.

With Bi-Laws adopted in late August, 2016, the GNC Coalition is in process of executing a work plan to continue their efforts through year 2020. Through this work plan, the GNC Coalition will build upon many key findings of this SWOT Analysis summarized above and be guided by its *Values* and *Goals*.

### GNC Coalition Values

Through collective action:

- ✓ Promote freight related economic development and growth
- ✓ Provide a collaborative process for Corridor-wide project prioritization and advancement
- ✓ Provide support for discretionary grant programs: FASTLANE, TIGER, other funding opportunities
- ✓ Serve as unified advocate on Corridor freight matters
- ✓ Share information among coalition members to enhance the movement of goods through the Corridor
- ✓ Educate the public and stakeholders on the economic benefits of the Corridor
- ✓ Provide an influence for smaller communities along the corridor to improve freight mobility
- ✓ Serve as “trusted advisor” and partner on Corridor freight transportation issues
- ✓ Support research efforts to improve the movement of freight along the Corridor

### GNC Coalition Goals

1. Position the Great Northern Corridor as a national leader and model of collaboration and coordination among transportation alliances in eight states and bordering Canadian provinces;
2. Sustain and enhance the economic vitality and global competitiveness of the Region;
3. Support efficiencies that reduce the transportation carbon footprint;
4. Support a sustainable and secure energy future;
5. Support freight compatible land use development along the corridor;
6. Invest in a 21st Century transportation system that utilizes diverse revenue and financing mechanisms;
7. Support a seamless, efficient, and integrated freight system;
8. Encourage optimal modal freight movement based on efficiency, demand, capacity, and environmental sustainability;
9. Implement advanced operations and technology solutions to improve freight mobility.