

The Case for Churchill

A community ready to serve Canada's North



Union of Canadian Transportation Employees
L'Union canadienne des employés des transports

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Canada needs a greater presence in our North and Arctic regions to protect our sovereignty, allow for the free flow of people and goods into and throughout the region, and to ensure environmental protection and economic development.

We understand that the Canadian Coast Guard is considering ways that it can help serve these needs as well as providing the highest level of search and rescue possible within these regions. The Royal Canadian Navy has already increased its capacity in the North through the Arctic and Offshore Patrol Ship (AOPS) program and the refueling station at Nanisivik on Baffin Island which was originally planned as a port.

We believe that there is an under-looked resource that can also be brought into a plan to achieve Canada's objectives in the North. That is Churchill, Manitoba. The Union of Canadian Transportation Employees, a Component of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, represents the members who work at the Port of Churchill. Our interest in this matter is multi-faceted.

First, we would like to see the Port re-opened under community or federal ownership. 10% of the population of Churchill were employed by the port. The Port of Churchill is not just an employer but a part of the fabric of the community and a strategic step arctic sovereignty. Secondly, we represent most employees of the Canadian Coast Guard and we want to ensure that Canada has the best Search and Rescue capacity in the North and Arctic. Thirdly, we believe that it is in the interest of not just the people within Churchill, but in the surrounding areas and communities to provide a stable economic base and a means for them to continue their social and economic development. That belief, is also in the interest of all levels of government who need to make additional investments in order to help Churchill and the other communities achieve their potential.

But perhaps most of all we are interested in promoting Churchill because of the region it is situated on and its proximity to the fragile and environmentally important Arctic Region. For better and in many cases worse, Churchill has been the site of many transportation and military activities over the years. That means it has already paid a great price for its development that no other community should have to bear. It also means that it has infrastructure and capacity that is without comparison in Northern Canada.

Why Churchill is the Obvious Choice

As the Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) considers possible locations for a new CCG base in Canada's north, there is one site that cannot and should not be overlooked. That is Churchill, Manitoba, the only deep water arctic port in Canada. In fact, it may just be the perfect fit to serve the needs of northern communities, the CCG and to protect and enhance Canada's northern border and our Arctic environment.

As the only North American port connected to the Arctic Ocean, Churchill has a viable and relatively up to date port with all of the facilities that the CCG might need for storage, maintenance and repairs. It is part of an international trade route that connects North America to both Europe and Asia. It has a fully trained workforce already within the community and the potential to draw, train and develop from a large Indigenous population to meet its current and future needs.

A History of Service

The Port of Churchill was constructed in the 1930's to facilitate the export of grain and commodities from Western Canada and to assist with the transportation industrial goods to the Northern Hemisphere. It was designed to promote and help both northern industrial and community development and the resupply of goods to these communities. But it was also built and maintained over the years to be an essential part of Canada's strategic requirement for defense and sovereignty.

Grain shipment has long been a key component of the Port of Churchill, but it was also used to exported quantities of honey, lumber, and livestock. Throughout the 1950's and 1960's the Port was used to import automobiles, liquor, pipe, tractors, transmission towers, machinery, and sodium nitrate. The grain side has been allowed to slide, first by the sale to an outside, private interest that slowed traffic and by the sale of the Canadian Wheat Board, which killed it.

Today, not just Churchill, but famers and producers all across Western Canada are paying a price for these ill-thought ideas. Especially the sale to OmniTRAX who bled the port dry and allowed the rail line to fall into disrepair.

A World Class Airport

Churchill has one of the largest and most effective airports in the North. It is capable fo providing service to a relatively high number of passengers and serves as the hub for northern ecotourism and scientific research. It is a major transfer airport for passengers and cargo travelling from southern destinations like Winnipeg to northern and remote communities in the Kivalliq Region of Nunavut.

The airport has a 9,195 feet (2,803 m) asphalt runway that is still maintained in good condition. This airport serves as a primary diversion airport for jet aircraft up to the size of a Boeing 747 or Boeing 777 that might be forced to make an emergency landing. This proved particularly useful during the tragic events of 911 when airplanes from all over the closed United States air space were safely diverted to Churchill,

The Churchill airport was originally part of the Fort Churchill military installation built by the United States during WW2. The facilities at the airport also supported both Canadian and American operations at the Churchill Rocket Research Range. It later served as a Strategic Air Command base for the US Air Force. With the disruption of the rail line the airport serves as the major transportation route for the people and goods that are required in not just Churchill, but the entire region.

The Capacity to Serve and Grow

Despite all of the above, the Port of Churchill still has many advantages including having one of the longest open shipping seasons in the North. It has four loading berths and is capable of accommodating and servicing vessels to a maximum of 225 metres LOA and at a maximum draft of 11.5 metres at low tide. That is more than adequate to meet any of the Canadian Coast Guard's needs. There is ample storage and the port is fully equipped and capable to make minor ship repairs.

There is an established and well-maintained infrastructure in Churchill, both at the Port and within the community. There are office buildings that are suitable for any purpose including any proposed CCG Northern HQ operations, as well as maintenance and storage facilities that can easily be retrofitted and converted to other uses. Other federal and provincial government presences in Churchill such as Manitoba Housing and Parks Canada as well as the RCMP can provide added benefits? and services to any new federal government investment.

There is an experienced workforce already on site in Churchill or that can be called back on short notice. They are used to handling a wide variety of cargos and can provide custom handling services including; consolidation, marshaling, packaging, and heavy equipment moving. There is an American 999 crane on site with a 100-tonne capacity and additional cranes can be mobilized as required. Even more importantly for this environmentally sensitive area, the Port of Churchill staff have been trained to handle hazardous goods and know how to take the appropriate care and caution with all dangerous goods and cargo.

Comparing the Options

The Port of Churchill is an important trade link and one of the few ports with the capacity and experience that could meet the demanding needs of the CCG. By comparison, the

port facilities in Resolute Bay are limited and can only handle ships of 5m draft alongside a sunken barge that is used as a dock. Deeper draft ships must dock in open water.

This is particularly problematic when you consider the increased risks from other drivers such as further development and tourism to name just a few of the challenges, let alone having to deal with search and rescue or environmental accidents. Other Arctic ports like Tuktoyaktuk suffer from a shallow approach channel and a high degree of in-fill silting. The Port of Churchill is well sheltered, with along-side “real” berthing facilities for the unloading of grain, general cargo and tanker vessels. It can meet all of the CCG’s needs in the North and the Arctic.

The Best Choice for the Environment and the Future

There is also the fragile northern environment to consider. Most of the development impact has been already done in Churchill and further environmental impact will be minimal. That cannot be said for any other possible site in the northern or arctic regions. And that must be a major concern for all stakeholders, especially the Government of Canada.

With a small amount of dredging and charting, this could be the best port location for the Canadian Coast Guard and the Canadian Navy as they plan to address issues of sovereignty and safety in the north. In addition, the latest trends in Arctic tourism including the voyage of the luxury cruise ship the Crystal Serenity to Cambridge Bay, Nunavut shows how quickly that industry is coming to the North. We need infrastructure and support to facilitate the safe docking of these types of vessels. The Port of Churchill is ideally situated to provide that support and help to enhance tourism activities that are already underway in this region.

An Economic Boom for the Arctic

The positive economic influence of locating the proposed CCG base in Churchill would be an economic lifeline to a community in economic and social distress. It would help diversify the local economy, build on existing strengths and create capacity for future growth. For a relatively small investment the people of the community and throughout the Arctic can begin to realize the commercial, recreational and tourism potentials.

The Port of Churchill is a vital and strategic Canadian asset. It is the best choice by any comparable factors. We rest our case for Churchill.