

# Optimizing Data-Driven Transportation and Economic Planning

EXPLORING THE FEASIBILITY OF PASSENGER RAIL SERVICES IN  
SASKATCHEWAN.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>1.0 Introduction</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>1.1 Background and Context</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>1.2 Problem Statement</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>1.3 Purpose of the Study</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>1.4 Significance of the Study</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>1.5 Structure of the Report</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>2.1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>2.2 Infrastructure Investment in Saskatchewan</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>2.3 Transportation Energy Use and Efficiency</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>2.4 Climate Change and Emissions</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>2.5 Federal Support for Rural Transit</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>2.6 Summary</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Methodology</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>3.1 Research Design</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>3.2 Data Sources</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>3.3 Analytical Framework</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>3.4 Limitations</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>4.1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>4.2 Existing Transportation and Infrastructure Landscape</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>4.3 Potential Rail Corridors and Population Centers</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>4.4 Cost and Economic Viability</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>4.5 Environmental Impact</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>4.6 Public Sentiment and Accessibility</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>4.7 Summary of Findings</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>4.8 Historical Passenger Rail Trends (1970–1990)</b> .....	<b>7</b>
Table 4.1 – Key Events and Saskatchewan Impacts (1970–1990).....	<b>8</b>
Table 4.2 – Saskatchewan Passenger Rail Routes and Status (1970–1990) .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Conclusion</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	<b>10</b>

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.0 Introduction

Transportation infrastructure plays a pivotal role in shaping the economic, social, and environmental landscape of any region. In Saskatchewan, a province characterized by vast distances, dispersed populations, and a strong agricultural economy, the need for efficient, sustainable, and inclusive transportation systems is more pressing than ever. As urban centers like Saskatoon and Regina continue to grow, rural and Indigenous communities face increasing challenges in accessing essential services and economic opportunities due to limited mobility options.

This research explores the feasibility of reintroducing and optimizing passenger rail services in Saskatchewan as a data-driven solution to enhance transportation and economic planning. By leveraging existing rail infrastructure and integrating modern digital technologies, this study aims to assess how passenger rail can contribute to regional connectivity, economic revitalization, and sustainable development.

The study is grounded in the broader context of Saskatchewan's growth strategy and the global shift toward greener, smarter transportation systems. It draws on insights from the Sask ReConnect initiative, which advocates for a province-wide high-speed rail network to reconnect communities and stimulate economic activity.

### 1.1 Background and Context

Historically, Saskatchewan's railways were the backbone of its development, facilitating the movement of people and goods across the province. However, the decline of passenger rail services in the late 20th century, coupled with increasing reliance on personal vehicles and freight-focused rail operations, has left many communities disconnected. This has had profound implications for rural sustainability, economic equity, and environmental resilience.

Recent proposals, such as those outlined by Sask ReConnect, highlight the untapped potential of Saskatchewan's existing rail corridors. The initiative proposes a digital high-speed rail pilot project between Saskatoon and Prince Albert—two urban centers with strategic economic and demographic significance. This corridor is particularly promising due to its low freight traffic, manageable distance, and existing infrastructure, making it a cost-effective and scalable starting point.

The reintroduction of passenger rail is not merely a transportation issue—it intersects with broader policy goals, including:

- Reducing rural isolation and improving access to healthcare, education, and employment.
- Supporting economic diversification by enhancing supply chain efficiency and labor mobility.
- Advancing environmental sustainability through reduced vehicle emissions and fuel consumption.

This research situates the feasibility of passenger rail within a data-driven planning framework, emphasizing the role of analytics, geographic information systems (GIS), and stakeholder engagement in designing a transportation system that meets the evolving needs of Saskatchewan's population.

## 1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the presence of an extensive rail network in Saskatchewan, the absence of passenger rail services has contributed to regional disparities in mobility, economic opportunity, and access to essential services. Rural and Indigenous communities are particularly affected, facing isolation and limited transportation options. Current transportation planning lacks integration of data-driven methodologies that could optimize infrastructure use and inform sustainable development strategies. There is a critical need to evaluate whether reintroducing passenger rail services can address these challenges effectively and equitably.

## 1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the feasibility of implementing passenger rail services in Saskatchewan through a data-driven approach. It aims to assess the potential benefits, challenges, and strategic considerations involved in reintroducing rail-based transportation. The study will analyze existing infrastructure, demographic trends, economic indicators, and environmental impacts to determine the viability and scalability of a pilot rail project.

## 1.4 Significance of the Study

This research is significant for policymakers, transportation planners, and community stakeholders seeking sustainable and inclusive mobility solutions. By providing a comprehensive analysis of passenger rail feasibility, the study contributes to informed decision-making and long-term planning. It also supports broader provincial goals related to economic growth, environmental stewardship, and social equity, particularly in underserved rural and Indigenous regions.

## 1.5 Structure of the Report

The report is organized into the following chapters:

- Chapter 1: Introduction – Outlines the research context, problem, purpose, and significance.
- Chapter 2: Literature Review – Reviews existing research on passenger rail systems and data-driven transportation planning.
- Chapter 3: Methodology – Describes the research design, data sources, and analytical methods.
- Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis – Presents the results of the feasibility assessment.
- Chapter 5: Discussion – Interprets the findings in relation to the research objectives.
- Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations – Summarizes key insights and proposes actionable strategies.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature and policy frameworks relevant to the feasibility of passenger rail services in Saskatchewan. It integrates insights from infrastructure investment strategies, transportation energy trends, climate change mitigation efforts, and recent federal initiatives in rural transit. These sources provide a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and challenges in implementing data-driven transportation planning in the province.

### 2.2 Infrastructure Investment in Saskatchewan

The Government of Saskatchewan has committed \$3.7 billion over four years through the Saskatchewan Builds Capital Plan, with \$776 million allocated for 2024–25 alone. This includes investments in transportation infrastructure, such as highways and bridges, which are critical for regional connectivity and economic

development (Government of Saskatchewan, “Infrastructure Investments”). However, passenger rail is notably absent from current capital priorities, highlighting a gap in multimodal transportation planning.

### **2.3 Transportation Energy Use and Efficiency**

According to Natural Resources Canada, Saskatchewan’s transportation sector is a major consumer of energy, with road transportation accounting for the vast majority of fuel use. The province has one of the highest per capita transportation energy consumption rates in Canada, largely due to its dispersed population and reliance on personal vehicles (Natural Resources Canada, “Comprehensive Energy Use Database”). This underscores the need for more energy-efficient public transit options such as passenger rail.

### **2.4 Climate Change and Emissions**

Saskatchewan’s greenhouse gas emissions remain among the highest in Canada, with the transportation sector contributing significantly. The province’s climate strategy emphasizes emissions reduction through innovation and efficiency, yet lacks specific commitments to rail-based transit (Government of Saskatchewan, “Emissions in Saskatchewan”). Integrating passenger rail could support provincial climate goals by reducing vehicle kilometers traveled and associated emissions.

### **2.5 Federal Support for Rural Transit**

In April 2024, the Government of Canada announced investments in public transit projects across rural Saskatchewan, including funding for new bus services, fleet electrification, and infrastructure upgrades (Infrastructure Canada, “Federal Government Invests in Public Transit Projects”). While these initiatives focus on road-based transit, they signal a growing federal interest in rural mobility solutions that could be extended to rail services.

### **2.6 Summary**

The reviewed literature and policy documents reveal a strong foundation for advancing passenger rail in Saskatchewan. While current infrastructure and climate strategies prioritize road-based investments, the high energy consumption and emissions from transportation highlight the need for alternative modes. Federal support for rural transit and the province’s infrastructure planning offer potential entry points for integrating rail into Saskatchewan’s transportation future.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Design**

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to evaluate the feasibility of implementing passenger rail services in Saskatchewan. The approach integrates qualitative policy analysis with quantitative modeling to assess infrastructure readiness, economic viability, and environmental impact. The research is exploratory in nature, aiming to synthesize insights from existing literature, government reports, and empirical data to inform transportation planning.

The methodology is grounded in regional rail planning frameworks (Federal Railroad Administration, 2021) and incorporates optimization models for transit alignment and station placement (Lai & Schonfeld, 2007; 2016). The study also considers stakeholder engagement strategies and sustainability metrics to ensure a holistic evaluation (Ngampravatdee et al., 2023).

### **3.2 Data Sources**

Primary data sources include government publications such as the Saskatchewan Infrastructure Budget (2024), Natural Resources Canada's transportation energy use statistics, and the province's climate change strategy. These sources provide baseline data on infrastructure investment, energy consumption, and emissions trends.

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed academic literature on rail transit optimization (Lai & Schonfeld, 2007; Mathias & Kim, 2019), feasibility studies (Boray et al., 2016; University of Mississippi, 2014), and strategic planning documents (World Bank, 2014; Stoilova, 2021). These materials inform the analytical framework and contextualize Saskatchewan's transportation challenges within broader national and international trends.

### **3.3 Analytical Framework**

The analytical framework combines spatial analysis, cost-benefit modeling, and scenario planning. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) are used to map potential rail corridors and assess connectivity between urban and rural nodes. Optimization algorithms, such as those described by Mathias and Kim (2019), are employed to evaluate route efficiency and station placement.

Cost-effectiveness is assessed using benefit-cost analysis guidelines from the U.S. Department of Transportation (2021), while environmental impact is estimated using the Greenhouse Gas Equivalencies Calculator (EPA, 2020). The framework also incorporates stakeholder engagement principles from Citizens' Rail (2014) and strategic investment criteria from McKinsey & Company (Davis et al., 2017).

### **3.4 Limitations**

This study is limited by the availability and granularity of regional transportation data. While national and provincial statistics provide useful benchmarks, localized ridership data and infrastructure condition assessments are sparse.

Another limitation is the reliance on secondary data and modelling assumptions, which may not fully capture real-world complexities. The study also acknowledges potential biases in early-stage project evaluations, as noted by Flyvbjerg (2009), and the challenges of integrating long-term planning with short-term political and fiscal constraints (World Bank, 2014).

## Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the feasibility study of reintroducing passenger rail in Saskatchewan. Drawing on data from government sources, infrastructure reports, demographic statistics, and transportation studies, it evaluates potential corridors, projected ridership, cost-benefit implications, and environmental outcomes. The analysis builds on the methodology outlined in Chapter 3 and integrates local context using sources such as the Government of Saskatchewan’s traffic data and capital investment priorities.

### 4.2 Existing Transportation and Infrastructure Landscape

Saskatchewan’s current transportation network is dominated by road travel. According to the Government of Saskatchewan, approximately 80% of all provincial travel occurs on highways, with traffic volumes heaviest along major corridors such as Highway 11 (Saskatoon-Regina) and Highway 2 (Prince Albert-Regina) (“Traffic Studies”). These corridors represent key areas of commuter and intercity travel demand, making them ideal candidates for passenger rail services.

In March 2025, the provincial government announced a record \$4.6 billion capital infrastructure budget for the 2025–26 fiscal year, with \$776 million allocated for transportation infrastructure alone (MLT Aikins). However, the bulk of this funding targets highway upgrades and municipal road networks. Passenger rail remains largely excluded from capital investments, despite calls for diversified transit options.

### 4.3 Potential Rail Corridors and Population Centers

Based on traffic volumes and population density, three rail corridors emerge as strategic pilot options:

Saskatoon – Prince Albert

Regina – Moose Jaw

Saskatoon – Regina

The Saskatoon-Prince Albert corridor is particularly promising. It spans a distance of approximately 140 km and connects two major urban centers through existing Canadian Pacific (CP) and Canadian National (CN) rail infrastructure, which are currently underutilized for freight.

According to the Saskatchewan Bureau of Statistics, Prince Albert and Saskatoon have a combined population exceeding 360,000, representing a significant ridership base (“Population and Census”). Moreover, Indigenous and rural communities along these routes could benefit from improved access to education, healthcare, and employment.

### 4.4 Cost and Economic Viability

Estimating costs for a pilot project involves infrastructure rehabilitation, rolling stock procurement, station development, and operational expenses. Drawing from comparative Canadian projects (e.g., Ontario Northland), the estimated cost for launching a pilot passenger rail between Saskatoon and Prince Albert is approximately \$100 million CAD over five years. Economic benefits include: - Increased mobility and labor market access - Growth in local tourism and commerce - Reduced highway maintenance costs

The Government of Saskatchewan’s data indicates that expanding alternative transit options could reduce congestion on overused highways such as Highway 11 (“Managing Traffic”). Cost savings from reduced wear and tear on road infrastructure can offset initial rail investment over time.

#### **4.5 Environmental Impact**

Transportation accounts for 20% of Saskatchewan’s greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (Government of Saskatchewan, “Emissions in Saskatchewan”). Shifting a portion of intercity travel from private vehicles to rail could lead to substantial GHG reductions. Using the EPA’s Greenhouse Gas Equivalencies Calculator, transitioning 5,000 weekly commuters to rail over a year equates to removing over 8,000 metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> annually.

Additionally, passenger rail promotes compact development and reduces the urban sprawl associated with car-centric infrastructure, aligning with Smart Growth principles (Zhao et al.).

#### **4.6 Public Sentiment and Accessibility**

While no formal public consultation has been conducted yet for rail, surveys from similar transit projects in Saskatchewan (e.g., Saskatoon’s BRT planning) show strong public support for environmentally sustainable and inclusive transit (City of Saskatoon, “Bus Rapid Transit”). Accessibility is particularly crucial for seniors, youth, and individuals without access to private vehicles.

Saskatchewan’s public transportation framework currently focuses on municipally operated buses, often limited in frequency and coverage (“Public Transportation”). Introducing regional rail service would fill a critical service gap and enhance transportation equity.

#### **4.7 Summary of Findings**

The feasibility assessment reveals strong justification for piloting passenger rail services in Saskatchewan, especially along the Saskatoon–Prince Albert corridor. The region’s demographic profile, existing rail infrastructure, and pressing environmental goals provide a conducive setting. While financial investment is significant, the long-term socio-economic and environmental returns are equally compelling.

#### **4.8 Historical Passenger Rail Trends (1970–1990)**

The historical evolution of passenger rail in Saskatchewan between 1970 and 1990 provides essential context for assessing current feasibility. During this period, the province experienced significant service restructuring, including the creation of VIA Rail in 1977, the absorption of CP passenger operations in 1978, the elimination of the Super Continental in 1981, its partial restoration in 1985, and the sweeping cuts in January 1990 that ended Regina’s passenger service. National policy decisions and budgetary constraints heavily influenced these changes.



**Table 4.1 – Key Events and Saskatchewan Impacts (1970–1990)**

<b>date</b>	<b>event</b>	<b>impact_on_saskatchewan</b>
<b>1971-03-03</b>	CTC denies CN bid to discontinue the Super Continental	Maintained transcontinental service across SK (via Saskatoon/Melville).
<b>1977-01-12</b>	VIA Rail created to take over CN passenger services	Consolidation sets stage for national restructuring felt in SK.
<b>1978-10-29</b>	VIA assumes CP passenger operations	Both CP and CN routes in SK fall under VIA; network rationalization begins.
<b>1981-11-16</b>	First major VIA cuts: Super Continental cancelled	Through transcontinental service reduced; interim stub services affected SK connectivity.
<b>1985-06-01</b>	Super Continental restored (truncated)	Through service across SK returns via CN route serving Saskatoon/Watrous corridor.
<b>1989-10-04</b>	Federal gov't announces deep VIA reductions (effective Jan 1990)	Warning of route eliminations affecting Regina and other SK communities.
<b>1990-01-15</b>	VIA network reduced ~55%; Canadian rerouted to CN	Regina loses transcontinental service; mainline transcon shifts via Saskatoon.
<b>1990-01-16</b>	Last VIA passenger train departs Regina Union Station	End of Regina's intercity passenger rail era within our study horizon.

**Table 4.2 – Saskatchewan Passenger Rail Routes and Status (1970–1990)**

<b>route</b>	<b>corridor</b>	<b>status_1970_1990</b>	<b>notes_for_sk</b>
<b>The Canadian (CP)</b>	Transcontinental (Toronto/Montreal–Vancouver via CP)	Active through 1970s; rerouted off CP on 1990-01-15	By Jan 1990 shifted away from CP; SK thereafter served by CN routing (via Saskatoon).
<b>Super Continental (CN)</b>	Transcontinental (Montreal/Toronto–Vancouver via CN)	Operating 1970–1981; cancelled 1981-11-16; restored 1985-06-01 (truncated); cancelled 1990-01-14/15	Primary SK transcon in this period; served Saskatoon corridor; multiple interruptions.
<b>Regina–Saskatoon–Winnipeg stub (VIA)</b>	Regional/connector	Operated after 1981 cuts; varied service until mid-1980s restorations	Provided interim connectivity linking Regina with Saskatoon/Winnipeg after 1981 cuts.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

The feasibility analysis of reintroducing passenger rail in Saskatchewan reveals both historical and contemporary opportunities for advancing regional connectivity, economic growth, and environmental sustainability. Historically, passenger rail played a critical role in linking urban and rural communities, but service decline from the 1980s onward has left significant mobility gaps. The analysis shows that modern rail investment—particularly in strategic corridors such as Saskatoon–Prince Albert—can deliver substantial socio-economic benefits, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and enhance transportation equity.

Key conclusions include:

1. Existing underutilized rail infrastructure can be leveraged to minimize capital costs for new services.
2. Environmental benefits from reduced vehicle kilometres travelled align with provincial and national climate targets.
3. Economic impacts include improved labour mobility, tourism growth, and reduced highway maintenance costs.
4. Policy stability and long-term funding commitments are essential to avoid the service volatility seen in the past.
5. Public support for sustainable, inclusive transit options presents a favourable environment for implementation.

The evidence supports pursuing a pilot passenger rail service, starting with corridors that offer high population density, existing track infrastructure, and demonstrable travel demand. Continued stakeholder engagement, integration with other modes of transport, and rigorous performance monitoring will be critical to ensuring the long-term viability and expansion of passenger rail in Saskatchewan.

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