

"Various capacity improvements, including the idea of a second main track along the city waterfront, have been under discussion for years."

Finn also states that the only rail project now being proposed to serve Gateway Pacific is the double-tracking of the Custer spur - an existing rail line that extends west from the main line to serve the two refineries and aluminum smelter at Cherry Point.

Finn contended that the Communitywise Bellingham study was based partly on earlier research focused on getting fast Amtrak trains through the congested rail corridor between Seattle and Vancouver, B.C. He argued that getting freight trains through the same corridor is a different kind of problem.

He also suggested that rail capacity growth will serve larger economic interests.

"We hope the Council will seriously consider our reservations about the recent study and consider, as well, the broader economic consequences of attacks on rail traffic," Finn's letter said.

Communitywise Bellingham's executive director, Shannon Wright, defended the report of her group's consultant, Transit Safety Management. That report noted that the siding proposal has been repeatedly identified as the most feasible way to increase local rail capacity, even before the Gateway Pacific project was proposed.

On Monday, May 14, Wright told the council that the consultant's findings help to make the case that the Bellingham rail siding project's impact on the city should be included in the extensive Gateway Pacific environmental impact study that is now beginning. BNSF should be asked to demonstrate how they could manage the added coal train traffic through the city without construction of such a siding, she added.

"This (siding) is the solution that has been mapped out time and again in preliminary engineering and budgets," Wright said.

Jack Delay, a Communitywise Bellingham organizer, told the council that if the siding is built, it will be an idling area for coal trains. If regulatory agencies allow both the coal terminal and the siding to be built, the railroad should be required to operate only its cleanest, lowest-emission locomotives on the line, he said.

Bellingham Public Works Director Ted Carlson told council members he expected to present them with more information about likely railroad impacts from Gateway Pacific.

Council member Michael Lilliquist said the issue is an urgent one.

"This is the nightmare scenario as far as I'm concerned," Lilliquist said. "If SSA Marine or BNSF can show us why this (siding) is not the necessary consequence, I want to hear it."

The Bellingham Herald

BNSF downplays fears over Bellingham waterfront rail siding

By JOHN STARK — THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

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A empty coal train heads south through Boulevard Park Wednesday morning, Aug. 24, 2011. The engine pictured is on the end of the train. PHILIP A. DWYER — THE BELLINGHAM HERALD [Buy Photo](#)

BELLINGHAM - A railroad official has written a letter to City Council members attempting to calm fears that construction of a proposed coal terminal would force construction of a long and potentially disruptive rail siding along much of the city's waterfront.

The railroad siding issue is the latest concern to emerge over SSA Marine's Gateway Pacific Terminal project at Cherry Point, south of the BP Cherry Point refinery. Last week, a citizens' group called Communitywise Bellingham released a consultant's report suggesting that the added rail traffic to and from Gateway Pacific might require the construction of a new rail siding stretching from Fairhaven almost all the way to Central Avenue, cutting off much of the access to Boulevard Park, among other things.

At full capacity, nine trains loaded with Powder River Basin coal and perhaps other cargoes would move through Bellingham to Gateway Pacific each day, and return by the same route.

In his letter to the council, BNSF Railway Co. government affairs director Terry Finn said it is incorrect to assume that the siding project is essential to Gateway Pacific operations. But his letter also notes that additional rail capacity through this area is needed.

"It is our opinion that capacity improvements on the Bellingham subdivision will be needed some time in the intermediate future regardless of the outcome of the (Gateway Pacific) proposal," Finn's letter said.