



**District of Squamish**  
**POSITION PAPER**

**Socio-Economic Impacts of the Proposed  
Highway Upgrades Through Squamish**



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*March 2004*

## Introduction

The District of Squamish overwhelmingly welcomes and supports the planned highway upgrades on the Sea To Sky Corridor, and sees the long-term benefit of this investment to both the province and especially to the Squamish area.

The intent of this document is to provide constructive input into the highway planning process, and includes key recommendations on how the planned upgrades can be implemented in such a way that they will support and/or enhance important economic assets to the Squamish area.

The current public process associated with the highway upgrades has been valuable from the perspective of examining solutions along the corridor that will allow for physical expansion before 2010.

There remains however, some ambiguity with respect to the current proposed solutions for key areas of the highway through Squamish that could irrevocably undermine the community’s plans to achieve long-term socio-economic stability and diversity—plans that focus on the area’s renowned climbing and the community’s identity as the “Outdoor Recreation Capital of Canada.”

## The New Squamish And The Importance of Climbing—

Home to more than 15,000 full-time residents, the District of Squamish is experiencing a rapid socio-economic transformation that is seeing tourism and outdoor recreation taking a significantly more prominent role in the importance of the local economy.

As a matter of fact, tourism has now surpassed the area’s traditional economic sectors as a key socio-economic driver and employment generator.

Centred on the Sea to Sky Corridor (Highway 99) between Vancouver to the south and the Resort of Whistler to the north, Squamish is bordered by the Coastal Mountains on the east and the Pacific Ocean on the west. This outstanding location offers an extraordinary array of remarkable outdoor recreation and lifestyle options such as wind surfing, hiking, mountaineering, mountain biking, wildlife viewing and climbing to name a few. This diversity is the primary reason the community has chosen to label itself the ‘Outdoor Recreation Capital of Canada.’



The community’s historic economic dependence on primary industry, and the decline of this industry, has prompted the implementation of a proactive strategy to diversify the local economy into other sectors. The intent is to aggressively redevelop and diversify the regional economy focusing on key assets, particularly in light of the coming Winter Olympics Games in 2010. Given this, the pursuit of underdeveloped sectors and sub-segments of the local economy is a priority. Tourism and climbing are vital parts of this.

Squamish is considered to be the premier urban climbing centre in the world. It is renowned internationally as the home of the Stawamus Chief, one of the world’s largest standing pieces of granite, providing climbers with beginner to advanced climbing opportunities on a year-round basis. The Chief however is only one of a number of important local destination climbing products that are key to the overall health of the area’s economy.

Other important destination climbing centres include Murrin Park, the Malamute, the Squaw, the Papoose and the Smoke Bluffs. These Granite Monoliths of Squamish, as they are known, are the critical centerpieces of an exceptionally wide array of rockclimbing and mountain opportunities in the greater Squamish area. For the purpose of this document however, the discussion will focus on two central areas that will be most directly affected by the proposed highway upgrades, and which are both provincial parks:

1. The Stawamus Chief and Associated Climbs;
2. Murrin Provincial Park.

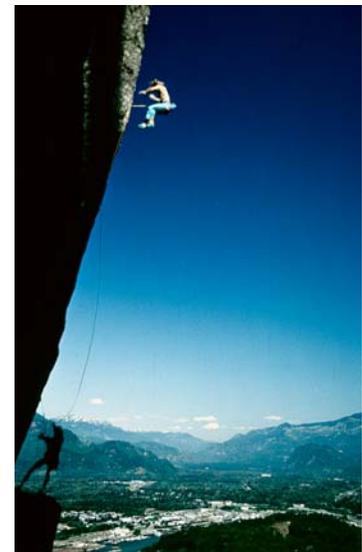
## The Socio-Economic Impact Of Climbing, And Recreation Tourism In Squamish

Climbing is defined as rock climbing and bouldering, and it has been part of the Squamish landscape and recorded history since the middle of the last century.

Events such as the first ascent of the main face of the Chief by Jim Baldwin and Ed Cooper in 1961 have brought international attention to Squamish, sustained over many decades. The advent of the 1990s has seen an exponential expansion of climbing in Canada and specifically in Squamish.

The Squamish area has become an internationally recognized climbing destination that draws vacationers from around the world intent on bouldering, traditional climbing, sport climbing and aid climbing. There has also been a very significant expansion of the resident climbing community that represents homeowners, taxpayers, new business operators, employees and various other valuable parts of a vibrant and diverse Squamish community. It is estimated that 15 to 20 per cent of the local population climbs at some level or other, and many of these individuals have chosen to live in Squamish for this particular aspect of their lifestyle.

*Photo (at right): most climbers are average citizens who are passionate about their recreation lifestyle. Shown here is local business person and climber Jim Sanford (photo by Kevin McLane).*



Better access to sites and training, as well as improved equipment are changing the climbing industry, making climbing one of the fastest growing recreation/sport activities world-wide. The estimated **overall value of climbing to the Squamish area alone is over \$20 million in direct impacts**, which includes estimated visitor expenditures (based on BC Tourism impact model), equipment sales, food and beverage sales, accommodation sales and employment figures.

Coupled with the expected forecasts of growth both within the sport of climbing itself and of the Sea To Sky Corridor, there is a strong position to not only protect the climbing assets in Squamish for the benefit of the entire region and the province, but also to invest in their enhancement.

## The Primary Climbing Products

The District of Squamish led a series of discussions and workshops with key stakeholders in the community to assess the proposed design, and provide the Ministry of Transportation with constructive feedback and recommendations from the community perspective. The following section is a summary of these workshops.

*Note: more detailed information on both these areas, as well as other important climbing products in the Squamish District, are attached in the appendices.*

### The Stawamus Chief Provincial Park Area

Average daily traffic estimates currently range between 24,000 to 34,000 travelers on the Sea To Sky Corridor through Murrin Park to Squamish. These figures are expected to nearly double through 2010 to 2025.

The current parking area at the base of the Stawamus Chief (see Appendix 1.a) is both inadequate and dangerous. For the tens of thousands of annual users (this includes hikers and tourist viewers) who use the parking area to stage their recreation activities, negotiating an entry and an exit into this parking area places both driver and passenger at risk every time.

*Photo (as right): Demand for parking at the base of the Chief is well beyond the lot's capacity to accommodate users. Seen here, the lot is already full during the shoulder season. At peak times users are forced to park along the highway creating additional safety issues for both recreationists and travelers.*



Although the current highway upgrade plans propose a slightly more articulated version of the existing access/egress to five lanes with a protected left-hand-turn lane in the centre (see Appendix 1.b), this will not adequately address the increasing demand for safe access to this popular area, and that designs have underestimated the rapid growth is already occurring due to the phenomenal popularity of bouldering at the base of the Grand Wall, and of hiking the Chief—being compared to the well-known Grouse Grind in North Vancouver.

While sensitivity to budget constraints remains at the forefront of the planning process, more deliberation is required in this part of the highway design that includes the socio-economic ‘opportunity costs’ associated with not making a more substantive investment in the highway access design for the Chief parking/staging area.

Currently there is no ability to make a legal left-hand turn for south-bound vehicles, who either make an illegal turn or turn further down the highway wherever safety permits and turn around to re-enter the parking area from the south. The consequence is that motorists either do not stop, having a negative economic impact and benefit to the area, or they make an unsafe entrance.

Improvement to the highway intersection to allow for legal left-hand turns from the south-bound lane will result in an increase in traffic from this direction. It is certainly in the interest of Squamish to capture such traffic, although this increased traffic flow has not been adequately considered in the preliminary highway design for this intersection (the protected left-hand turn) which given this anticipated increase will not resolve the safety issues related to this area.

The entrance from the south, for north-bound travelers, presents its own challenge when drivers must make an immediate entrance into the parking area without opportunity to slow from the 80 kilometre highway speed into the lot.

Given the projected increases in both general traffic numbers and users of the Chief climbing and hiking areas (anticipated to exceed 350,000 users by 2012), the proposed design upgrade still presents a significant safety issue.

The District of Squamish therefore strongly advocates for a more articulated design to address the long-term growth implications related to this Provincial asset, and especially the critical safety concerns that exist; which will not be adequately addressed by the proposed design.

The recommended design from Squamish is an underpass (see Appendix 1.c). This scenario would resolve both the short-term and the long-term needs while addressing the safety issues, and taking into consideration the social and economic values of the corridor. In addition, it will provide for a more efficient flow of traffic during and beyond the 2010 Winter Games.

The key values and recommendations associated with this discussion, and which the BC MoTH is respectfully requested to integrate into its planning are as follows:

- that safe access be a major priority with respect to the entry and exit from all directions at key staging areas such as the Chief Parking Lot and Apron (see Appendix 1-d), and that the District's underpass option replace the existing protected left-turn scenario;
- that adequate socio-economic research be integrated into all solutions and designs create a safe and low-stress solution for all with all the appropriate traffic calming measures;
- that the existing parking area be expanded to accommodate the current use and the projected increase in uses of these vital staging areas;
- that these staging areas be integrated into the thinking and planning for the "Gateway" concept plan currently being discussed for the entrance to urban Squamish, and that consideration be given to establishing an interpretive station that describes the importance of the area's granite monoliths;
- that a highway design through both urban and rural Squamish respect the important socio-economic value of the recreation assets along the corridor;

- that BC MoTH consider the integration of multi-use trails along the highway between the urban Squamish area south as far as Murrin Park in order to provide safe passage for all recreationists;
- that consideration be given to noise reduction and security wherever possible when planning effective solutions.

### **Murrin Provincial Park Area**

Murrin Park is a principle centre for climbing in the Squamish area, offering more than 350 climbs from beginner to advanced levels. Currently the corridor travels through the park dividing it into two sections creating a safety issue for users (especially pedestrians). Given this, increased traffic along the corridor has gradually eroded the value of recreating in the park because of noise-pollution and safety concerns.

Regardless, the park remains a vital recreation asset, especially to climbers, though further degradation of the Murrin Park experience is of great concern. Projected increases in traffic, especially leading to 2010, will undermine what remains of the quality experiences in the park with its small lake and climbing and hiking options.

The current highway upgrade plans propose two solutions for Murrin Park. The first to remove some of the rock wall along the east side of the highway to make way for additional expanded lanes, and the second is the “Olympic Solution” that would involve temporary measures to add a third lane using the shoulders and limiting traffic during Game time.

The District of Squamish is strongly advocating that an additional solution be considered for passage through Murrin Park, that a by-pass be considered around the park (see diagrams in Appendix 2 document).

The proposed by-pass should be considered as an alternative to the BC MoTH option of removing the existing rock walls in order to develop a four or five lane highway section. The permanent loss of the climbs along the area of rock to be removed is not an acceptable solution for the District of Squamish. While the “Olympic Solution” is preferable to this, it neither resolves the long-term needs of the province to generate an efficient corridor to Whistler, nor does it relieve the ever-increasing traffic pressures and impacts in Murrin Provincial Park. The by-pass solution is therefore the preferred option to this section of the highway, and the District of Squamish (who believes there is cost-benefit to this scenario) is urging the Province to investigate this as an option.

The BC MoTH is requested to integrate the following additional values and key considerations into planning along this section through Murrin Provincial Park:

- that the destruction of valuable climbing areas for the purposes of expanding the highway is not an acceptable solution to the District of Squamish;
- that consideration be given to improving access to the Park, including an expanded parking area to generate a safer more secure environment for users;
- that the BC MoTH carry-out a cost-benefit analysis of the suggested by-pass in an effort to assess its value as a long-term solution based on the Ministry’s 25 year planning horizon.

## Concluding Comments

The political, social and economic climate in Squamish is changing rapidly. The opportunities emerging from this change revolve around proactive leadership, growth and diversification, environmental sustainability and long-term proactive thinking.

Tourism, recreation and specifically climbing are significant and growing socio-economic assets to the Squamish area and to British Columbia. These assets should be protected with support and investment in order to maximize the benefits both regionally and provincially.

The enhancement of existing, and integration of new, economic sectors such as climbing will especially achieve a variety of important local goals including sectoral diversification and the establishment of a healthy and balanced economy.

The result will be a revitalized, dynamic and energetic region that has levered strategic partnerships with government and the private sector to achieve its goals.

Squamish IS the “Outdoor Recreation Capital of Canada” and intends to reposition itself in the global marketplace using this message. The quality of the message is largely dependent on the quality of the outdoor recreation assets in the area however, and the District of Squamish strongly urges the province of BC and MoTH to consider the recommendations being made here.

*Thank you for your time and attention to this important issue.*

## Contacts at District of Squamish

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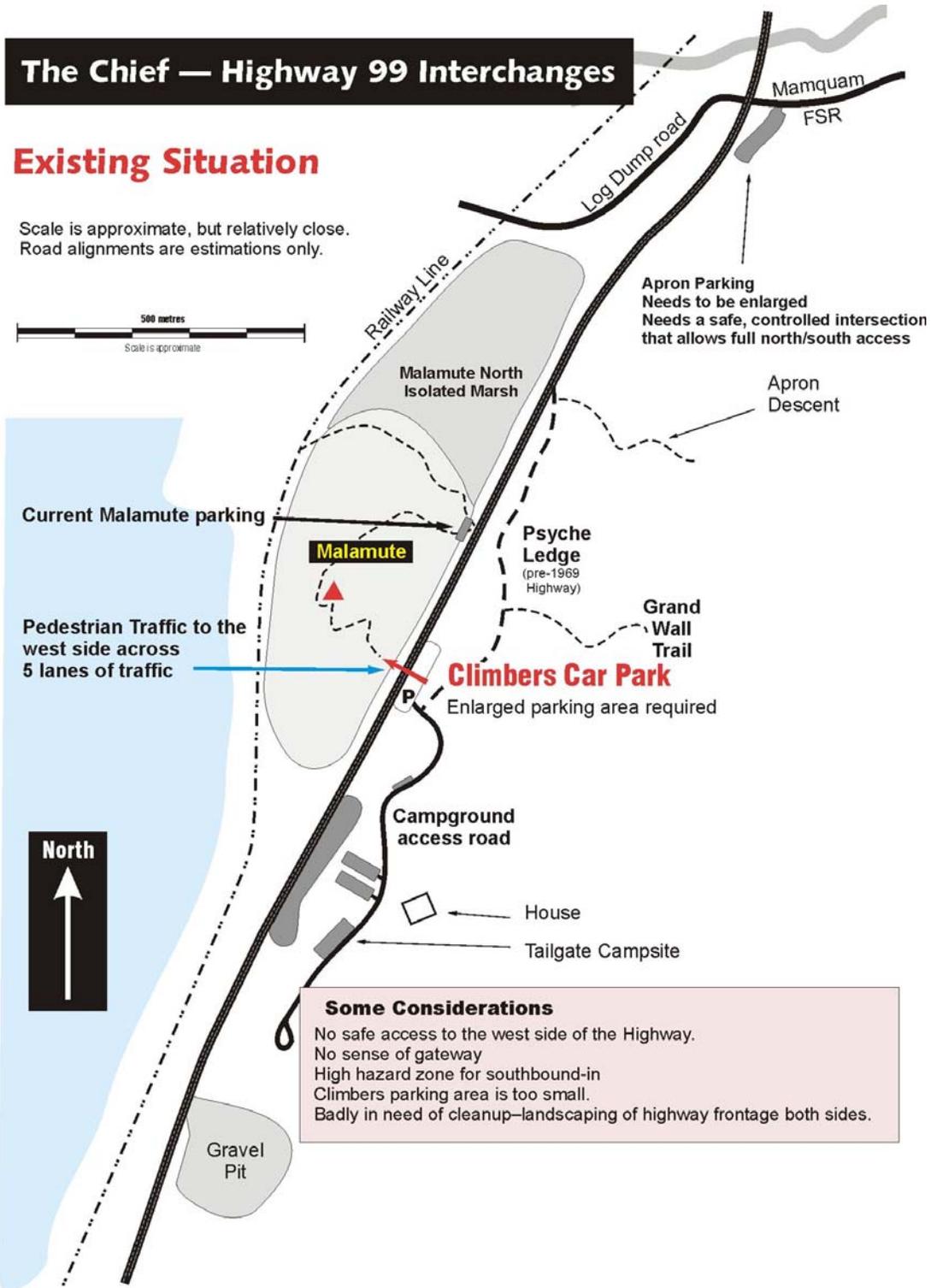
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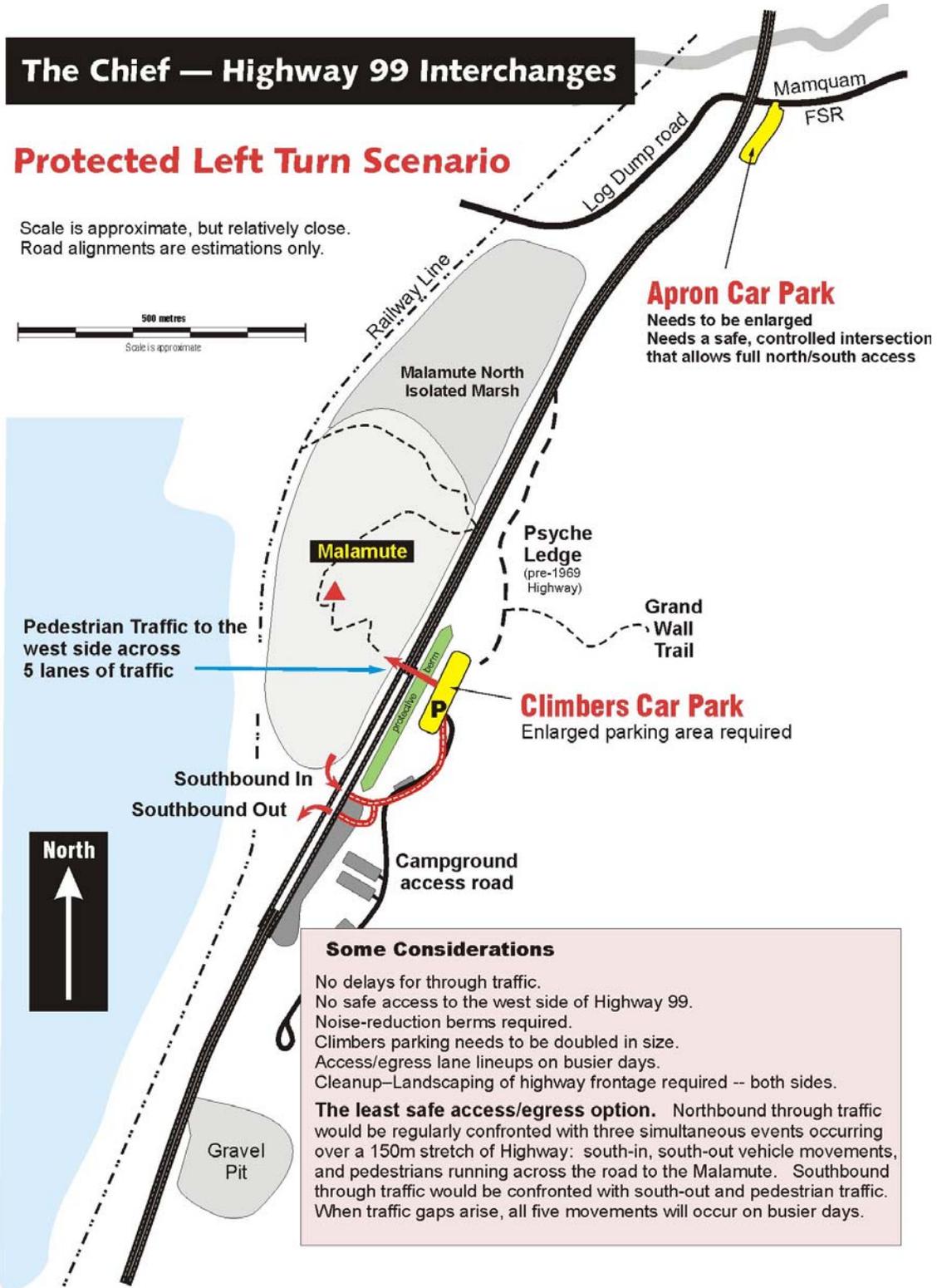
# Appendix 1-a

## Existing Situation—



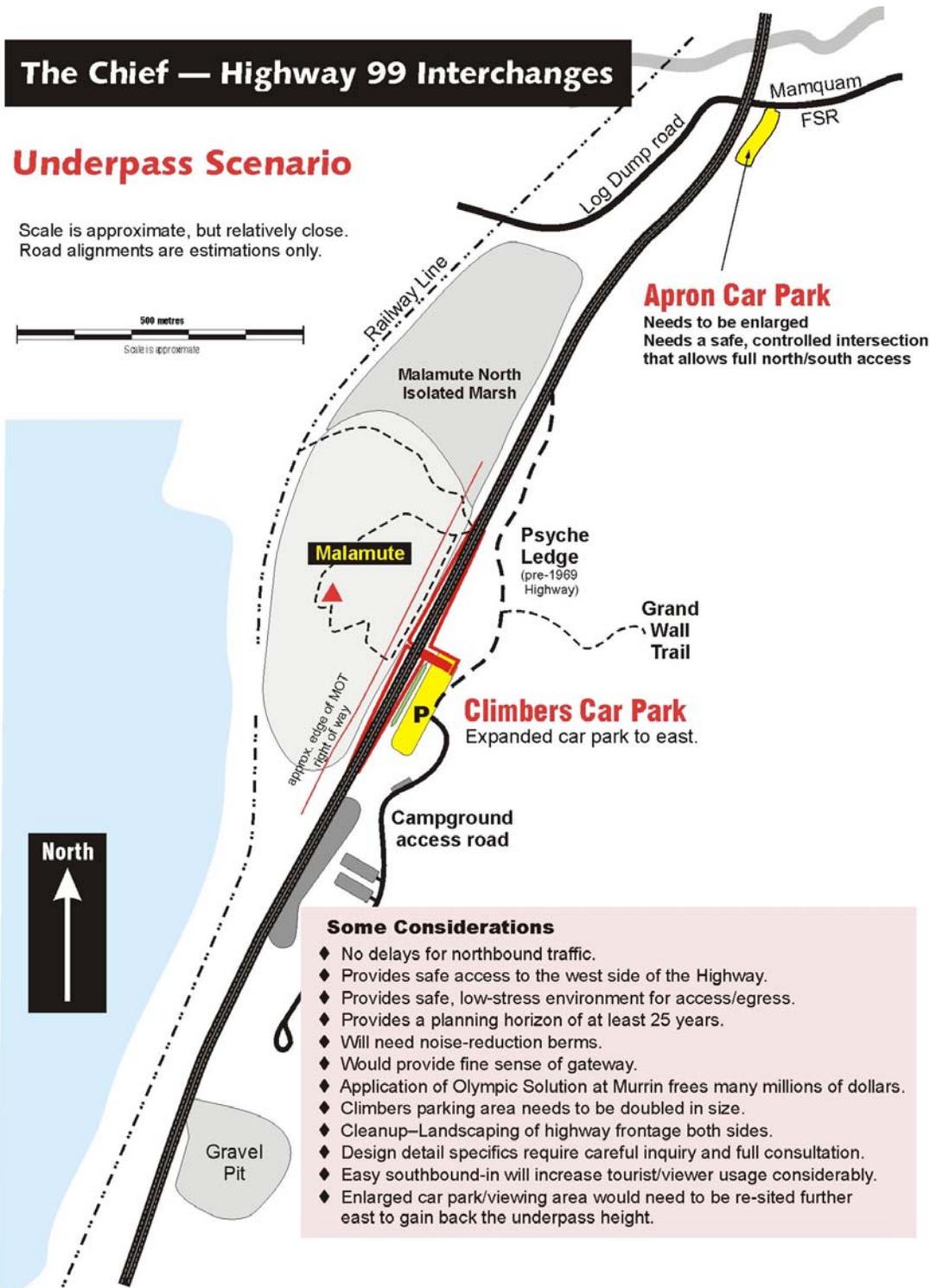
# Appendix 1-b

## Protected Left Turn Scenario—



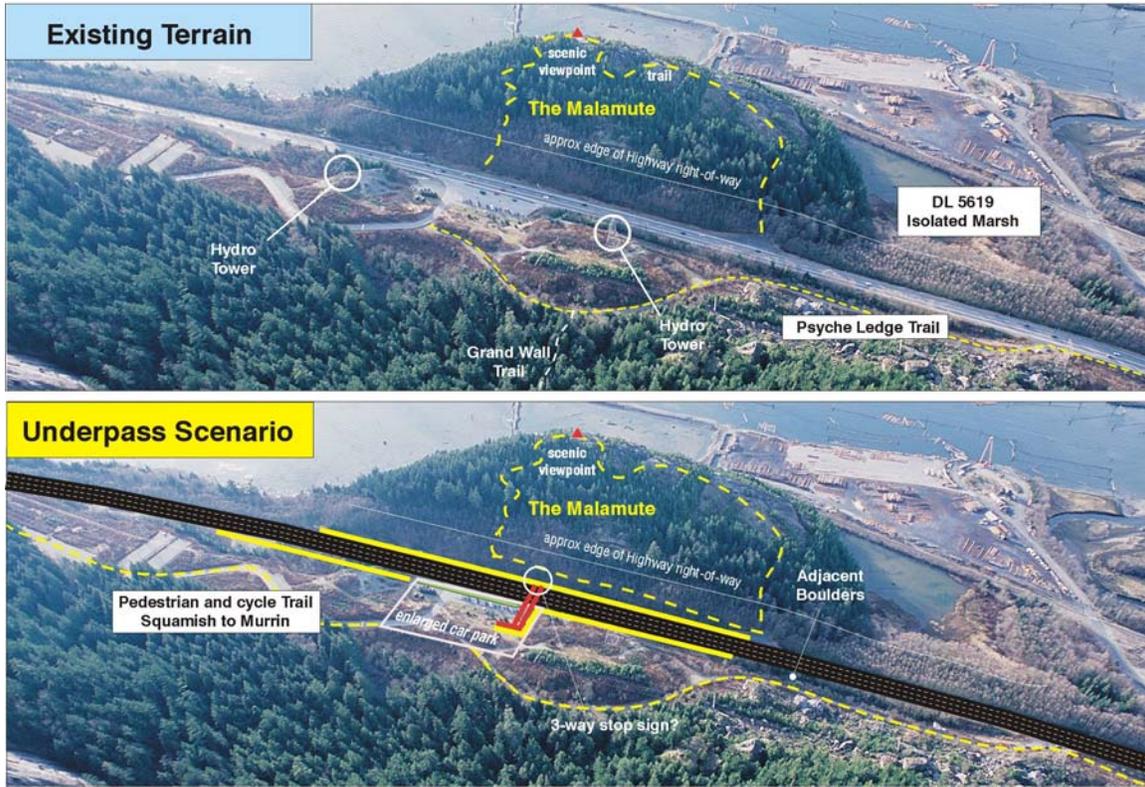
# Appendix 1-c

## Underpass, Preferred Option—

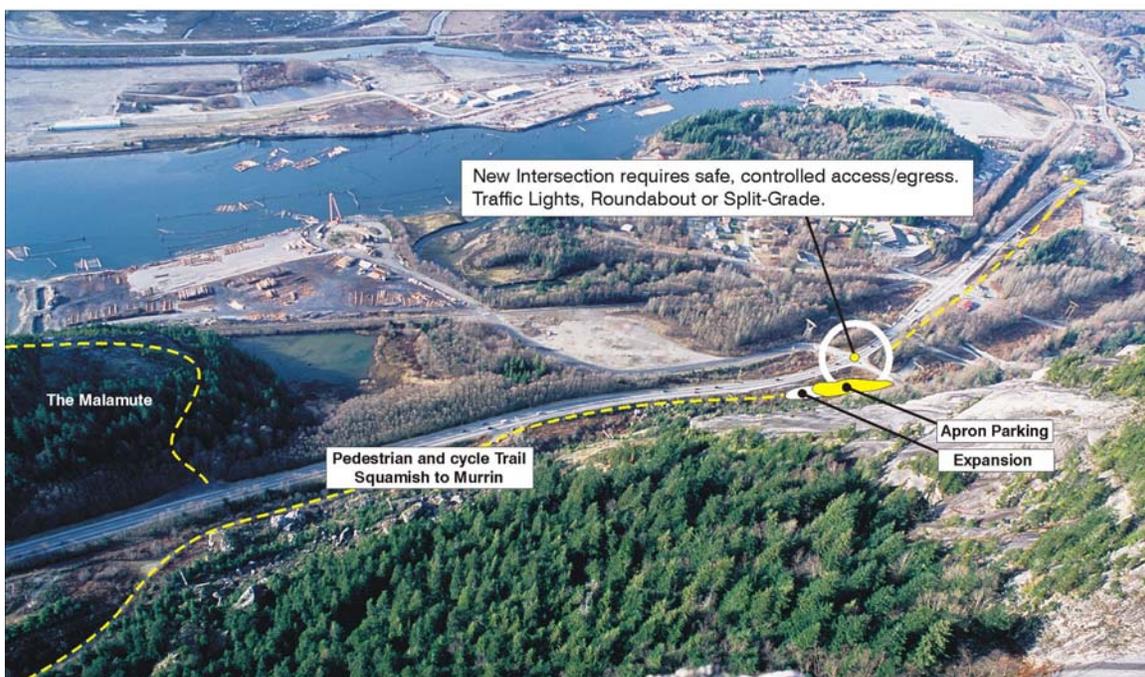


## Appendix 1-d

### Highway 99 Rebuild — Chief Intersection



### The Chief Intersection Apron and Parking—



## **Appendix 2**

*Reference Document—*

**Climbers Access Society – The Rockclimbers Perspective**