

Gates as CN Rail Holder Gets Quebec Plea to Paint Bridge

By Frederic Tomesco Nov 13, 2014 3:04 PM MT Bloomberg

Bill Gates, the biggest investor in [Canadian National Railway Co. \(CNR\)](#), received an appeal from two Quebec mayors to prod the carrier into repainting a signature bridge in the provincial capital.

Quebec City Mayor Regis Labeaume and a counterpart from nearby Levis wrote to Gates, the [Microsoft Corp. \(MSFT\)](#) co-founder, to seek help in getting Canada's largest railroad to spruce up its Quebec City Bridge, which they say is "plagued by rust."

Canadian National has "refused to finish the paint work it abandoned in 2005, and is categorically opposed to making improvements it deems merely esthetic," Labeaume and Levis Mayor Gilles Lehouillier wrote in a letter dated today, a copy of which was sent to Bloomberg News.

The letter opens a new front in a local and national campaign for fixes to the 95-year-old bridge, which crosses the St. Lawrence River to connect Quebec City with Levis. The 987-meter (3,200-foot) cantilever span, the world's longest of its type, was designated a historic site of Canada in 1995.

Gates [controls](#) about 13 percent of Montreal-based Canadian National through his Cascade Investment LLC and the Gates Foundation, data compiled by Bloomberg show. Those holdings were valued at about C\$8.4 billion, based on yesterday's closing price.

Railroad Chairman

Michael Larson, Cascade's chief investment officer in Kirkland, [Washington](#), didn't return a message left about the mayor's letter.

Florent Tanlet, a spokesman for the Levis mayor, said the letter to Gates was delivered today by e-mail and courier. The two mayors haven't received a response, Tanlet said by phone.

Canada's federal government had sought to compel the railroad to pay for painting the bridge, an effort rebuffed by a judge last month. In an Oct. 22 decision, a Quebec Superior Court judge ruled that Canadian National had no such obligation because it had already met a 10-year, C\$36 million investment commitment under a 1997 agreement with the governments of Quebec and Canada.

Canadian National "has made significant investments to ensure the [Quebec](#) Bridge is safe and will remain safe for the long term," Mark Hallman, a Canadian National spokesman, said today in an e-mail. The railroad has offered to donate the bridge to any government to facilitate an investment in its aesthetics, he said.

"Painting the bridge is not about safety; it's about aesthetics," Hallman also said. "CN believes governments should take responsibility to protect or enhance the heritage value of the Quebec Bridge, not CN."

The mayors wrote that while the railroad isn't legally required to pick up where the painting ended -- leaving 60 percent of the bridge still to be done -- "is it not its moral and corporate social responsibility to do so?"

"What message is CN sending to the people of Quebec, and particularly to the some 750,000 residents of Quebec's metropolitan area?" Labeaume and Lehouillier wrote. "It is totally unacceptable for this CN-owned infrastructure to mar the majestic beauty of the Quebec City area and the St. Lawrence River."

Gates's net worth is \$87.1 billion, according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index.