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Cascadia's Cultural Diplomacy Could Be Key Legacy of FIFA 2026 ^[1]

King Charles' recent address to Canadian parliament, which carefully delineated the state of Canada's relationship with the United States while also pointing to its future prospects beyond North America, provided an important moment for reflection in the borderlands. Protecting Canadian sovereignty, according to the monarch, will rely on significant investments in the economy and national defense, but also more dynamic engagement with the global community. "Fundamental change is always unsettling," he declared during the speech. "Yet this moment is also an incredible opportunity."

The British royal's words are a far cry from the cross-border rhetoric projected by the White House earlier this year, or the campaign slogans that came to define the recent Canadian federal election. They point to a relationship between Canada and the U.S. that continues to be steeped in mutual interest but also one that is admittedly transformed by recent politics.

That message of opportunity is one that should take on greater significance in the Cascadia region. For years, leaders in the cross-border area that includes British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon have argued that cross-border integration can deliver greater economic prosperity, cultural exchange, and overall quality of life for those who live in the region.

For some critics, that ethos of cooperation might seem quaint in the wake of discouraging newspaper headlines and social media barbs. Much like other Canadians, British Columbians have scaled back their engagement with the U.S. to a significant extent, including economic activity and cross-border tourism.

Such sentiments are apparent in the drastic drop of B.C.-plated cars crossing the border into Whatcom County, Washington. A steady post-COVID recovery in travel started to reverse in February 2025, with B.C. vehicle crossings dropping by nearly 30% compared to the previous year. By April, the year-over-year decline accelerated to 51%. And these trends seem likely to hold. A recent opinion survey conducted by Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies found that 57% of British Columbians polled did not feel safe or welcome in the U.S. - a figure that is higher even than Canada's national average of 52%.

And yet at least one future milestone points to the possibility of unprecedented collaboration between the two countries, and between B.C. and Washington: The 2026 FIFA World Cup. The international soccer tournament, the most watched sporting spectacle in the world, is rivalled only by the Olympics in terms of global attention and impact. Among the host cities across Canada, Mexico, and the U.S., Vancouver will host seven of the matches next June and July, while Seattle will stage another six. The intensity of that sporting schedule should turn the I-5 corridor into a hotbed of soccer engagement for fans from both sides of the border and indeed from around the world.

The World Cup matches are expected to attract over 1.6 million visitors combined, with an estimated 900,000 projected for Vancouver and 750,000 for Seattle. While predicting the increase in border crossings is likely an exercise in fruition, it goes without saying that there will undoubtedly be surges in traffic, particularly given the alternating timing of the games between Seattle and Vancouver. Summer is already peak travel season in the region, and as we saw during the Taylor Swift concerts in Seattle, and later in Vancouver, cross-border travel is a key component of the visitor experience in Cascadia. And it can get messy.

Is the region up to the challenge? Vancouver's successful staging of the Winter Olympics in 2010 would suggest so. So too would Seattle's recent hosting of marquee sporting events like the NHL Winter Classic and Major League Baseball's All-Star Game. Looking further back there's Vancouver's hosting of the World Expo in 1986, and Seattle's hosting of the World's Fair did in 1962. Both events left undeniable civic and regional legacies that resonate even today.

Yet the 2010 Olympics serve up the most relevant comparison in terms of scope and scale. The Winter Games left behind infrastructural legacies such as an improved Sea to Sky Highway connecting Vancouver to Whistler, and an expanded Skytrain network, but also incremental but symbolically significant regional improvements such as enhanced efficiencies at the B.C.-Washington border crossings.

Through bi-national collaboration, the region leveraged the occasion of the Olympics to get a second passenger train on the Amtrak Cascades route and developed the Enhanced Driver's License for cross-border travel. Much like the expanded infrastructure, these gains in cross-border mobility continue to benefit the region today.

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Unlike the Olympic boosters from two decades ago, FIFA organizers and backers in Vancouver and Seattle aren't promising that same combination of infrastructural innovations and civic amenities. In fact, planning for the cross-border dimension of traveling between Seattle and Vancouver has been largely left to local stakeholders. This dynamic practically necessitates a spirit of collaboration. If there is one thing the Cascadia region has proven time and time again, it is that through cooperation we can rise to the occasion – in ways that benefit both sides of the border. Now is the time for a renewed and compelling narrative for the borderlands predicated on the values of engagement and diplomacy.

The World Cup's legacy, therefore, won't be defined by athletic venues, transportation systems, or urban redevelopment – although the existing versions of these criteria will be crucial to the staging of FIFA 2026 in Cascadia. Rather, the tournament's legacy in the region could be defined by how it recalibrates the narrative of the Canada-U.S. relationship. In this sense, Cascadia could serve as a model for the rest of the continent.

Already, the region's policy makers, industry leaders, and government agencies have come together to foster this shared goal. While this has become more challenging in recent months, the common vision that we share as Canadians and Americans is still apparent.

But there's also a significant role for folks on the ground in the communities where FIFA's matches are staged or simulcast. That includes Cascadia's largest metropolitan regions but also a multitude of fan engagement sites in between, creating massive opportunities for fans and volunteers from both countries to co-mingle and cheer on their favorite teams.

International soccer, therefore, provides a timely and perhaps necessary mode for citizen- and community-driven diplomacy that just might change the shaky trajectory of Canada-U.S. relations. That won't come easy in this era of acrimony and tough talk. But given the stakes of the bi-national relationship, and the historic opportunity of hosting a World Cup as a unified region on a global stage, we can't afford not to embrace this critically important occasion.

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