

City has done its part for future of Via Rail service

It's been a rough year for passenger rail service in New Brunswick and one has to wonder what the future has in store.

Earlier this week, the Times & Transcript reported that Via Rail has further schedule changes planned, effective Jan. 7, that will effectively add more time to the commute of those people travelling the entire route from Halifax, or Moncton, to Montreal, or from one point in New Brunswick to another. Part of the slowdown has to do with a station change in Quebec, another part has to do with a speed limit reduction on a portion of the Newcastle subdivision, imposed by Canadian National (CN) Railway.

That's on top of the October 2012 decision by Via Rail to cut the Ocean service — which runs from Halifax to Montreal — from six days a week to three days a week.

The move has drawn criticism from advocacy group Transport Action Atlantic that this is another step to driving people away from the train and essentially killing off passenger rail service in the Maritimes.

In the aftermath of the story, I also received comment from Patrick Murray, who is the Atlantic Canada representative for Unifor Council 4000, the union that represents Via Rail employees as well as employees in sectors like trucking transportation, catering and hospitality, warehouse and freezer logistics, skilled trades and mechanical, courier services and administrative.

Mr. Murray felt strongly that



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changing the schedule of the Ocean will make Via's current customers, ex-customers.

"The Union's position would be that here is yet another change to the schedule so that people will be discouraged from travelling on the Ocean train, thus making it appear that ridership and revenue is down. Via Rail's message is crystal clear in that they do not want to operate train service in Atlantic Canada," he wrote in an email to me this week, adding that passenger rail service should be in place to provide a service, not designed to make a profit.

"Our own Atlantic Canadians are not being given the opportunity to travel by train due to the fact the service has

been cut in half. If the name of cities such as Quebec, Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto are not part of the equation the Corporation wants nothing to do with the service. All that the Corporation cares about is the corridor (Quebec City to Windsor) and trains travelling in any other part of the country are not looked at as being viable or needed. Again just another attack on Canadians!"

Mr. Murray describes how seniors used to come from the northern part of New Brunswick to Moncton for hospital visits and were able to return the same day — now impossible on the thrice-weekly schedule.

In addition, he lamented that students, who are Via Rail's future travellers, are not able to travel home on the weekends anymore, which they use to be able to do.

While I can't disagree with him, one thing I will take issue with from Mr. Murray's commentary is how he said politicians like Moncton Mayor George LeBlanc and our own MP Robert Goguen have been silent and inactive on this very important ordeal.

While I would agree that no great public proclamations have been made by either man on these issues, that's not what is going to lead to change, anyway.

Fixing Via Rail won't take boisterous comments and political posturing, it will take a defined shift in vision and hard work behind the scenes to change the culture of the railroad and ensure it operates to benefit Canadians. A little more funding wouldn't hurt, either.

I've been told by Transport Action Atlantic that Mr. Goguen is in fact a champion of ensuring there is good rail service in the region and it is something that he and the rest of the Atlantic caucus are working to address.

On the other hand, our city's mayor has done in my view all he should do at this point.

The City of Moncton was part of a conglomerate that put forward \$13,000 in order to have Greg Gormick, hired by Transport Action Atlantic, complete a report that looks at not only Via Rail's reduced frequency of the Ocean passenger service, but also the implications of CN Railway's plans to abandon the track between Moncton and New Brunswick's north shore and the collapse of industrial rail service.

City of Moncton approved \$5,000 in funding for the study, while City of Dieppe kicked in \$2,000 and Town of Riverview, City of Miramichi, City of Bathurst and Enterprise Greater Moncton each added \$1,500.

Mayor LeBlanc could have stood up and made comments about Via Rail cutbacks, but they likely would have fallen on deaf ears with the federal government.

However, if this report is released and the recommendations within end up being endorsed by the councils of several New Brunswick communities as well as an economic development agency, that's a lot stronger measure that could have a chance to be heard in Ottawa.

Mr. Gormick is an independent

consultant who has past clients that include Canadian Pacific, Canadian National Railway, Via Rail and numerous elected officials and public agencies. The report also has the backing and experience of David Gunn who was consulted with and reviewed the document. Mr. Gunn is a former president of American rail company Amtrak and before that worked a variety of jobs in the industry in cities such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Toronto.

The report contains 13 recommendations that Mr. Gormick has said will be something municipalities can act on. The report is completed and is expected to be released soon, likely early in the new year.

While Via Rail and passenger train service isn't overly important to me personally — I've ridden the train once in the past decade that I can remember — it is no doubt vital to many New Brunswickers and should be something the government ensures remains available to those who need it.

While cars and planes might be the preferred method of travel for those who have them or can afford them, a train is crucial for inter-province travel and needs to be part of the future of Moncton and New Brunswick.

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