

Via Rail changes to affect travel times from Maritimes

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Times & Transcript
December 16, 2013



Via's Ocean arrives in Moncton on Thursday afternoon from Montreal heading to Halifax. Via is introducing changes that will affect commute times on the route.

Photo: RON WARD/TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

Via Rail is putting in place changes to the route of the Ocean in January that will lead to a longer commute time for those going between Montreal and Halifax, as well as those traveling within New Brunswick on the passenger rail train.

It's the latest in a series of changes that has drawn the ire of rail transportation advocates, who believe Via Rail is taking steps backward instead of making progress.

“To make a long story short, the total transit time from Halifax to Montreal is almost 24 hours and you have to go back to the era of the steam locomotive to find a longer transit

time,” said Ted Bartlett, the vice-president of the transportation advocacy group Transport Action Atlantic.

“It’s no way to run a railroad. You don’t look for ways to make it more inconvenient for the traveling public, to lengthen travel time.”

Mylène Bélanger, spokeswoman for Via Rail, said effective Jan. 7, the Ocean will stop at Sainte-Foy in Quebec as opposed to stopping at the Charny station. This results in a stretch where the train will be going in reverse, at slow speeds, over the Québec Bridge.

“An exhaustive review, as we continuously do on all our operations, shows that Sainte-Foy station is, by far, the station of choice,” Belanger said in an email. “More than 146,000 passengers currently use Sainte-Foy station, versus less than 13,000 that board or detrain (sic) at Charny. This is more than 10 times over.”

As a result, the schedule was adjusted accordingly and will see train 15 – running Tuesday, Friday and Sunday – leave Halifax at 11 a.m. instead of 12:20 p.m., but arrive in Montreal the same time as before, 9:15 a.m. the next morning, meaning the total travel time has been increased by one hour and 20 minutes.

Belanger said train 14 – which travels on Wednesday, Friday and Sunday – will arrive in Halifax at 6:38 p.m, in Moncton at 2:07 p.m. It will leave Montreal at 6:55 p.m. the previous day. Also, the schedule change means that on weekdays passengers on train 15 will now have the option of transferring to train 33 at Sainte-Foy and arriving in Ottawa at 10:55 a.m.

While the schedule changes impact those who travel the entire length of the Ocean, it will also lead to longer commute times for those traveling within New Brunswick.

Part of the increased travel time is due to the fact that Belanger said their “trains are also subject to a speed limit reduction on a portion of the Newcastle subdivision by the owner of the infrastructure.”

Jim Feeny, a spokesman for CN, which operates the Newcastle rail that runs through New Brunswick, said the speed limit reduction is responsible for less than half of the total slowdown along the entire line and he said the reduction is a “standard operating measure.”

The change will however make it a longer trek for people traveling within New Brunswick.

As an example, to go from Moncton to Campbellton on the current schedule takes five hours and 22 minutes, according to Via Rail’s website. After Jan. 7, it will take six hours and seven minutes.

Coming from Miramichi to Moncton currently takes one hour 58 minutes. Under the new schedule, it will take two hours and 31 minutes.

Anyone leaving the Hub City and riding the Ocean all the way to the end in Montreal will be in for an 18-hour, 43 minute voyage starting Jan. 7, whereas it currently takes 17 hours and 21 minutes.

A trip from Moncton to Halifax, which avoids the Quebec and Newcastle slowdowns, will be largely unaffected under the new schedule, in fact clocking in two minutes faster after Jan. 7, at four hours 16 minutes.

Belanger said those passengers who are impacted by these changes will be notified.

Bartlett and his organization have long rallied against the 2012 cutbacks that made Ocean run only three times a week as opposed to six, and this is just another move they say is driving people away from passenger rail service.

“It’s just another annoyance that it’s taking longer, it’s not progress,” he said. “I can’t say it’s a win for anybody, but as (former Amtrak president and rail consultant) David Gunn says, Via has a way of breaking out the marching band in celebration whenever there is bad news.”