

High-speed rail ambition misguided, says consultant

Author of upcoming report for Metro said basic upgrades to service and infrastructure are first needed for Canadian rail system

By **COLE HOBSON**, Times & Transcript

A Canadian transportation consultant said he's happy to see a group come forward with suggestions on improving rail passenger service in the country, but he believes there are other important steps to be acted on before building a high-speed rail system would be feasible.

“There are things in there I would quibble with. They mean well when they talk about high-speed rail, but that's so premature,” said Greg Gormick of the report released last week by Unifor entitled *Getting on Board or Running off the Rails?*

“We need to just get proper rail service going on so many routes in this country. We're so far away from making an appeal for true high-speed rail, to me the whole discussion leaves me a bit cold.”

Unifor, a national union with over 300,000 members in over 20 different sectors, which includes VIA Rail workers, released a report last week criticizing cutbacks and suggesting reinvestment in the faltering rail passenger service industry, as well as the suggestion for implementation of a high-speed rail system in Canada.

“Railways helped build the modern Canada we know today,” said Unifor national president Jerry Dias during last week's launch of the report in Toronto. “Investing in passenger rail could translate into increased energy conservation, lower our ecological footprint and reduce urban congestion. That's the way of the future,” he added, noting the government's current attempts to cut their way to prosperity at VIA Rail have resulted in abject failure.

Gormick, who himself is soon set to see his report released on the rail passenger service industry in this region, said his document will contain similar concepts as the Unifor document, but will delve further into the issues and provide more concrete action items that can even be acted on by municipal councils in Metro Moncton.

“There will be some similarities, but I think the New Brunswick report goes a lot further in looking at the situation in Atlantic Canada. I'm giving recommendations that I think could easily be applied, certainly in the case of VIA,” he said. “I mean, the equipment that is being used right now is wrong, the tri-weekly schedule (of the Ocean) is wrong, the fact that we don't have a long-term strategy for new equipment that will revive the Ocean and other trains across the country, these are all things I'm discussing in the New Brunswick report.”

Unifor said years of government funding cuts at VIA Rail have led to service and job reductions - and a corresponding decline in ridership.

They said government projections for 2013 and 2014 indicate that VIA Rail's overall funding is set to be reduced by 65 per cent between 2010 and 2014.

Jordan Brennan, an economist in the research department with Unifor, noted the development of a high-speed rail system in Canada was the more 'ambitious' of the two options they presented.

“High-speed rail typically involves its own infrastructure and building entirely new infrastructure is costly, we think that still could be beneficial in terms of kick-starting the economic growth which has been sluggish for decades, particularly as a consequence of underfunding our infrastructure,” he said. “The other option we mentioned is just simply to upgrade and modernize the existing infrastructure ... We think without even creating a new high-speed rail system there's still plenty of room for improvement at VIA Rail.”

Gormick said reinvesting in the railroad is in fact a strategy he can get behind and it's similar to what he'll be suggesting in his report.

Gormick was hired by Transport Action Atlantic to do a report that looks at the implications of the Canadian National (CN) Railway's plan to abandon the track between Moncton and New Brunswick's north shore, VIA Rail's reduced frequency of the Ocean passenger service and the collapse of Industrial Rail Services.

It was funded at a total cost of \$13,000, including \$5,000 from the City of Moncton, \$2,000 from the City of Dieppe, and \$1,500 each from the Town of Riverview, the City of Miramichi, the City of Bathurst, and Enterprise Greater Moncton. The report is now completed and is expected to be released to the municipal councils shortly by Transport Action Atlantic.

Ted Bartlett, vice-president of Transport Action Atlantic, said there's a lot in the Unifor document they can support and he believes they are 'singing from the same hymn book' when it comes to the importance of investing in the rail system.

“I guess on the negative side they attribute a lot of the problems to lack of staffing and while we sympathize with employees who have had to make adjustment or lost their jobs this is not the big issue here. The big issue is service to the public and that's what we at Transport Action are focused on,” he said. “(Gormick's report) will say many of the same things, you will not see though an urging of the employment of more Unifor members in stations along the way.”

Bartlett said an example of good way to keep a station going even if VIA has cut back employees is seen in Rogersville. After VIA Rail closed the station, the town took over the operation of it, making it a municipal building that doubles as a tourist bureau, while also servicing train customers.

Despite the criticisms, Brennan said the purpose of their report isn't just about saving union jobs. He mentioned, however, that more employment is crucial to returning the service to respectability, as he said there's been a correlation between the number of employees working and overall ridership numbers since the railway's inception in 1978.

“Brian Mulroney cut VIA Rail in half in 1989 and it consequently sharply reduced ridership and VIA Rail has been obsessed with cutting employees through the '90s and 2000s and ridership continues to decline with the cuts,” he said. “Forget the union positions, it's just looking at historic facts that cutting employees and reducing service is not going to make VIA anymore economically viable.”

Brennan said they plan to continue to push this report and its suggestions through all levels of government and hopes Canada follows in the footsteps of other industrialized nations that have invested heavily in their railways and have seen big benefit.

“We think it's long past time we have this national discussion about how to upgrade our passenger rail system,” he said. “As far as we can tell it's on life-support or ready for extinction, so we should make a decision one way or the other what to do about it.”

Similarly, Gormick is hoping his report and continual urging from transport advocates will lead all levels of government to action.

“What I'm trying to go do in the end, I'm trying to build a groundswell of support that will help push the feds,” he said. “They can say 'well who is Gormick? He's just a transportation consultant and rail advocate.' It's a little more difficult to turn away (the concerns of) major cities and towns.”