

Rail report soon to be released

By Cole Hobson

Times & Transcript
7 Nov 2013

Thursday marks the fourth annual National Railway Day in Canada, but an Ontario-based transportation writer and consultant who has completed a report on the rail industry in the Maritimes said it's hardly time to celebrate.

Three years ago the Government of Canada declared Nov. 7 to be Canada's National Railway Day, to commemorate the driving of the last spike in the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). It came nearly a decade after the Maritimes were joined to Central Canada by completion of the Intercolonial Railway (ICR), which linked Halifax with the existing Grand Trunk Railway in Quebec.

But Greg Gormick, who was instrumental in the 2010 proclamation in the House of Commons, said a few short years later the railway industry is still in turmoil.

"We have a do-nothing federal government that is clearly not interested in the rail issue. We have provincial governments that want to sit on the sidelines and let the feds do everything, except the feds aren't doing anything and therefore, the way my report on the situation in New Brunswick reads, is the municipalities are going to have to use what influence they do have to nudge these guys along," he said.

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.

Gormick, who was previously aligned with Transport Action, but now works as an independent consultant, has past clients that include Canadian Pacific, Canadian National Railway, Via Rail and numerous elected officials and public agencies.

He said the report, which is now in the final stages of approval and is expected to be released later this month, puts forward a set of 13 recommendations that can be acted on.

"I've worked in municipal government, that's where action can occur because that's the level of government that's close to the people," he said. "The railway issues are close to

the people, they want action. This is people in places like Moncton and Rogersville and Campbellton ... that are feeling the effects of the government no rail policy.”

On Wednesday, Gormick gave the Times & Transcript some insight surrounding some of the 13 recommendations included in his report.

The primary thing, he said, is “don’t trust CN to make a deal,” surrounding saving the Newcastle subdivision line that traverses northern New Brunswick, which the railway company has moved to abandon unless they can find additional funding for repairs and increased business.

Gormick said he believes municipalities need a long-term guarantee that there is a commitment to that rail.

“We need to look at what’s been done in other jurisdictions, particularly in the cases where the public has taken back ownership of the infrastructure,” he said. “I’m saying take the railway back, work it out, figure out what it’s worth, how you can get it, what it’s going to cost, then set it up as a publicly-owned railway and bring in a private company to handle the maintenance and operation of the freight service and maintain the level necessary for proper passenger service.”

On the topic of “proper passenger service,” Gormick said one of his other suggestions is a “no brainer” concerning restoring levels of service to the Ocean train, which currently serves stops between Halifax and Montreal three times a week.

Gormick said his report will point to resources that Via Rail has available to be able to operate the Ocean not just the six days a week it had previously run, but instead with daily service.

“So get the train rolling and start making plans to get the train back as a full-service train over its entire route from Montreal to Halifax on a daily basis using proper equipment, which Via also has.”

The third major point the report covers is concerning the collapse of Industrial Rail Services.

Gormick said during research for his report, Industrial Rail opened up all their books and files to him and he thinks Via Rail is more to blame for the company’s closure.

He said Industrial Rail fully admits that they made mistakes, but he believes Via Rail should also be pressured from all levels of government to open their books and provide more detail on what happened in this situation.

“Industrial Rail and the 240 jobs in Moncton at that plant, got the shaft from Via. It’s about time that somebody forced Via to divulge all the information,” he said, noting his report will detail the relationship between the two companies and how he feels Via made

near impossible demands of Industrial Rail. “If you want to blame somebody for closing out those jobs, blame Via.”

Gormick also noted that it’s Via Rail’s year to get a full audit from the office of the Auditor General and he’d like to see that happen in order to get the full viewpoint on Via’s operations.

“We need to be looking at how Via is managed and as people in the Maritimes will appreciate, it was an audit just like this that got Marine Atlantic turned around from being a sorry example of a crown corporation into one that the people of Canada can now take some pride in,” he said.

Gormick said it was a “very discouraging exercise” doing the research into his report, but noted “it was very encouraging finding out that we’re not helpless in the situation. The public does a have role to play, through their municipal politicians.”

Gormick said the report will also look at similar situations in the U.S. and examine solutions that have been enacted south of the border, at a reasonable cost.

“But nobody should make any mistake about this one. In order to save the Newcastle subdivision, in order to beef Via up and get it on the right track, there’s going to have to be some public money spent,” he said. “My take on this is we have been misspending a lot of the public money that goes into Via.”

Transport Action Atlantic vice-president Ted Bartlett said the rail passenger picture in the United States continues to improve, with increased ridership and commitment from the government and companies involved giving hope that such a turnaround could occur here too.

However, Bartlett said American rail company Amtrak’s philosophy is “diametrically opposed” to Via’s, as they have put greater resources and focus into their routes and it has shown dividends in increased ridership.

Transport Action Atlantic maintains that frequent service is essential to growing the traffic base in any passenger business, and that a tri-weekly operation simply cannot meet the public need.

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