

Rail deal is first step: expert

By COLE HOBSON, Times & Transcript

A national transportation consultant who authored a report on the province's rail system said VIA Rail's decision to put forward money to repair and maintain a stretch of track in northern New Brunswick is positive, but noted his cynical side believes it's only a "pre-election Band-Aid" for the region.

"It's useful, but it doesn't represent any big change in thinking, any admission that we have some problems, serious problems with the rail passenger system," said Greg Gormick. "These are all issues that need to be addressed.

"It's a good first step, but that's all it is. It's the most important step in the sense that if there was no railway line there would be no passenger service, but as was said by the minister of transportation and others, there has to be a plan to boost the ridership and improve the promotion of the train. That's the crunch. I think there's still a lot of things that need to be done before anyone knows which way they can turn on this."

Gormick, who authored the recently released report entitled Revitalizing New Brunswick's Rail Sector, said he wasn't surprised the funding came forward, "because an election is looming," but said it's not optimal circumstances.

"That's a hell of a way to run a transportation policy for a nation, isn't it? That we do things on the basis of four-year time frames tied to elections," he said.

Federal Transportation Minister Lisa Raitt announced on Monday in Fredericton that Via Rail will invest \$10.2 million to rehabilitate a 71-kilometre section of rail between Miramichi and Bathurst that CN said it was planning to abandon. The section of track doesn't have any freight traffic, but is used by VIA Rail's Ocean and the abandonment would have effectively ended passenger rail service east of Quebec City.

Raitt said she had followed the situation closely and strongly urged VIA Rail and CN to work together to find a solution.

"It's something we were concerned about and wanted a solution for," she said.

New Brunswick and CN earlier this year announced a 15-year commitment to provide shared funding of up to \$55 million to repair and maintain two sections of the Newcastle subdivision rail line that runs between Moncton and the North Shore.

That move guaranteed the continued provision of freight service to places such as Miramichi, Bathurst and Campbellton for at least the next 15 years; however, the package did not cover the middle section between Miramichi and Bathurst.

Marc Savoie is the vice-president of advocacy groups Transport Action Atlantic and Save our Trains in Northern New Brunswick. He said the funding announcement showed that if there's enough public discontent, it can effect change, but he had the same sentiment as Gormick in that it's only a start.

"It's a step in the right direction, we have won a battle, but it's not the war," said Savoie. "The main goal is to restore daily service. We need a service that's going to meet the needs of Maritimers and Canadians and at three days a week, it doesn't. It's not convenient, they can't travel when they want to, it's not what we want and it's not what we need."

New VIA Rail CEO Yves Desjardins-Siciliano has said they need "to see the market and ridership increase before we can look at increasing the frequency," and added that "Anything is possible. ... Frequency has to be based on the needs of the market and be financially viable."

He pointed out that ridership is currently around 80,000 per year and they hope to increase it to 125,000.

Savoie said there's a simple solution in order to increase ridership.

"(Frequency) should be restored in order to increase ridership. It should not be as a response to increased ridership, that's reverse thinking and that's not the way it should work," he said. "If you're offering public transportation yet it's not convenient ... people aren't going to take it, they are going to look for other modes of transportation.

"If they are thinking they are going to keep this service the way it is and expect ridership to increase, it's not going to happen."

Savoie said proof of higher ridership with increased frequency can be found in VIA Rail's past, as their ridership in 2010 and 2011 - when it was six days a week of service - was 127,000 and 134,000, respectively.

Of course, that would also come with higher operating costs and VIA Rail had said in 2012 that ridership had dipped about 50 per cent over the past 15 years and the cutback was a business decision.

But Gormick said VIA Rail needs to realize that the Ocean should be there primarily to provide an adequate service.

"The Ocean is never going to show a profit," he said. "Intercity passenger trains do not, so it has to be admitted what we want here.

"It is a necessary public service, so how can we deliver that service in the most effective and cost-effective way possible? That's what has to underline any investigation of the future of this service."

Gormick said some trains on very high-density routes around the world do show an operating profit, but when you factor in up-front capital costs it's another issue. He said passenger railway isn't just high-density lines, however, especially in areas of rural New Brunswick.

"It's a series of lines and you need those feeders bringing traffic into the high-density lines. The systems do not show a profit. There is no passenger rail service in the world that shows a profit and the same can be said for the other aspects of our transportation system if you put all the costs in," he said. "We do not recover the full costs from highway use, we don't recover the full cost of the aviation system. There's the starting point, recognizing that public passenger transportation is always going to require some form of support."

Gormick also said that it will be impossible for VIA Rail to almost double the passenger numbers while offering only the same number of trains. He suggested that if fully restoring six days a week of service isn't possible, perhaps a situation could be implemented where the train runs more frequently between intermediate points and only goes the full route three times a week.

Gormick also noted that Amtrak in the United States has released data in the past that has shown increasing some of their tri-weekly trains by over half to run seven days a week has resulted in only "marginal" cost increases - significantly less than a doubling of expenses.

"The point is, are you doing this because you are trying to show a profit? And if you are, then you are going down a dead end," he said. "Are you improving the services to increase its benefit for the people who pay for it both through their tickets and through their taxes? Then obviously increasing the frequency is the answer."

While some northern New Brunswick mayors have vowed to come together to brainstorm ideas to help boost ridership, Savoie said a big part of the responsibility needs to be on VIA Rail itself, in terms of making the service more convenient, faster and also investing money in promoting the Ocean.

"You don't see much on TV or in the East Coast promoting VIA Rail," he said, noting promotion efforts are much greater in the Toronto, Montreal and Quebec City region.

"It's kind of going backward in saying that again the (lack of) clients or the customers is the problem, when really, you need to be providing a service, you need to be promoting a service people are going to take."

Gormick also agreed that it is incumbent upon VIA Rail to take responsibility for boosting ridership.

"If they want to involve the province and municipalities and the citizens, that's great, consultation is always helpful. But they are the ones that ultimately have to make the decision and have to make the case to the federal government for whatever they will need to do this and I think what needs to be recognized is improving the Ocean is going to cost some money," he said.

Savoie said he believes the VIA Rail announcement does show a commitment to the region, but was also done in order to avoid a great deal of problems if passenger service in the region was threatened.

"There's been an enormous amount of pressure and I think they are aware that there would have been significant backlash had they not saved that stretch of track. It's not a significant investment, we're talking about \$10 million, it's really nothing at the federal level. As (New Brunswick NDP MP) Yvon Godin has said, it's a drop of water in the Baie des Chaleur," he said, noting their advocacy group is still in the works of getting their petition with 25,000 signatures pushed out to members of the House of Commons.

Savoie, an Ottawa native who has lived in Campbellton for the past four years, said he knows the inconvenience of the current rail system first-hand. Under the six-day-a-week system, he used to travel back to Ottawa frequently to visit his family and fiancée, taking Friday and Monday off and having a long weekend.

Since the cuts, that's not possible for him to do, as more days off are needed and he's had to look to other transportation options.

"I'll drive to Moncton and I'll fly out of Moncton or I'll take the bus. But it shouldn't be like that, I shouldn't have to drive three hours out of the way in order to travel to Ottawa, that doesn't make sense," he said. "If their plan is really inter-city connections then it needs to include the eastern part of the country as well."

Savoie said he realizes it impacts people more deeply than himself too, such as seniors who are sick and need medical treatment in bigger city centres now having to factor in extra costs related to hotel stays, as well as university students trying to travel home having more difficulty.

"It really is a vital link to our daily lives up here and I've come to realize that and I've become a lot more passionate about the issue because I realize how deeply it affects a lot of Maritimers."

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