

VIA Rail service needs riders: CEO

By Shawn Berry, Legislature Bureau

FREDERICTON – Passenger rail service through New Brunswick may be saved, but the new CEO of VIA Rail says ridership on the line needs to improve before the company will consider expanding the service from the current three-day-a-week offering.

"We have to see the market and ridership increase before we can look at increasing the frequency," Yves Desjardins-Siciliano said yesterday.

"Anything is possible. Frequency has to be based on the needs of the market and be financially viable."

Desjardins-Siciliano, who was named the new president and chief executive officer of VIA Rail Canada over the weekend, made the comments in Fredericton, where federal and provincial politicians held a news conference to announce VIA Rail and CN have a tentative agreement to maintain passenger rail service through northern and eastern New Brunswick.

Federal Transportation Minister Lisa Raitt said the passenger carrier 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.

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.

"It's a great day. But I do look forward to what VIA and the communities of New Brunswick can do together to take advantage of this renewed commitment. I'd love to see increased ridership because that of course will help ensure VIA's service is sustainable in the long run."

Raitt credited the Alward government with making the first move when it stepped in to maintain a 224-kilometre stretch of rail line between Moncton and the north shore.

Earlier this year, the provincial government and CN partnered to commit \$50 million to repair the 224-kilometre Newcastle Subdivision line between Moncton and New Brunswick's 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.

"That was hugely important, but today to be able to bring the passenger rail piece with it. This is a great day," Desjardins-Siciliano said, calling it a partnership between the federal, provincial government and the two rail companies to ensure passenger service.

The announcement comes at an important time. The summer months represent two-thirds of VIA's business, which runs three days a week between Montreal and Halifax.

While politicians heralded the deal at the Fredericton announcement, Desjardins-Siciliano said it was VIA's decision to invest the money.

"It's a total business decision for VIA Rail," he told reporters. "We do carry 80,000 people through the province. It is an economic, commercial decision. Having this link between Halifax and Montreal is part of the network. Our commitment has been there forever and will hopefully be there forever as long as people continue to use it.

"It is a reflection of the hope we share at Via that through rehabilitation of this line we may see traffic grow."

Desjardins-Siciliano told reporters he hopes to increase ridership on the Ocean line to 125,000. He said the improved rail line should help with VIA's efforts to bring what is a 23-hour train ride from Montreal to Halifax down to 20 hours.

He said VIA Rail has been looking since winter at the business case for investing in the line, which currently operates at a \$17-million-a-year deficit.

"We took three months to look at our options with the rail line, meet the province, municipalities, look at the market opportunity and convince ourselves that if we made the investment and re-started the service, that there would be a possibility for growth. I think three months to look at that is reasonable," Desjardins-Siciliano said.

In welcoming the announcement, mayors from communities along the line said it's now time help bolster ridership so the service isn't threatened again.

Miramichi Mayor Gerry Cormier said he would be speaking with his colleagues about what they could do.

"We have to try to get together with mayors to increase the ridership."

He said with the new commitment the service has to be supported.

"We've been working on this for a long, long time," said Cormier. "A year ago, it didn't look so good. This is a good day for Miramichi, New Brunswick and Canada today.

Richibucto Mayor Roger Doiron, president of the association of mayors of francophone municipalities, said more frequent service would go towards doing that.

"This is a new departure for the entire community," he said. "Now we have to make sure we have a quality service from VIA and ensure that communities use it."

Acadie-Bathurst MP Yvon Godin, the lone NDP member from New Brunswick, said the focus now needs to be on making VIA a viable option for travellers.

"The government has the responsibility now to promote VIA Rail. VIA Rail, we don't hear about it," he said.

Godin, who credited pressure from citizens and the NDP with saving the rail line between Miramichi and Bathurst, said the Tories were likely pressed into action over fears of what the loss of service would mean for MPs from the region come the next election.

Miramichi MP Tilly O'Neill-Gordon attended the announcement with Conservative colleagues Moncton-Riverview-Dieppe MP Robert Goguen and Madawaska-Restigouche MP Bernard Valcourt.

"It's a great day, a day that shows that by working together and negotiating, you can get a lot accomplished, and it's a blessing for (Raitt) in a way because now she gets us out of her hair. But she listened," O'Neill-Gordon said.

"That's what it takes. It's not about standing up and screaming and banging on the table. We met with (the late finance minister) Jim Flaherty; he's smiling down on us right now. We met with the prime minister. He was aware of it, and I went and talked to him myself, and we all did, really."

The tentative agreement still has to be ratified by the boards of directors of both VIA and CN.

With files from Kris McDavid of the Miramichi Leader

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