

## N.B. rail line to be saved: expert

*By Cole Hobson, Times & Transcript*

The author of a recently released report on rail industry issues in the region doesn't believe Canadian National (CN) will end up abandoning part of their track through northern New Brunswick.

"I don't think the 44 miles (71 kilometres) between Miramichi and Bathurst will be abandoned. I think the feds will come forward and put the money down, because we are getting up for a federal election campaign. That will motivate it and it's important that happens," said transportation consultant Greg Gormick, and author of the 177-page document "Revitalizing New Brunswick's Rail Sector," which was released last week.

"The cities of Miramichi and Bathurst are not pleased. They are happy the freight service is being retained, but they already realize, those mayors and economic development officers in Miramichi and Bathurst both realize they need that line complete."

The province and CN announced a 15-year commitment to provide shared funding of upwards of \$55 million to repair and maintain two sections of the Newcastle subdivision rail line that runs between Moncton and the province's North Shore last week. The province will provide up to \$25 million in infrastructure costs to repair the line, while CN will provide up to \$30 million to maintain and operate the line.

However, it was also announced that the discontinuation process would move forward on a middle section of the track that runs between Miramichi and Bathurst, due to the significant investments required to maintain it and since it's an area that doesn't have any freight customers.

It is, however, used as part of Via Rail's Ocean, which serves points between Montreal and Halifax.

Sean Finn, CN's executive vice-president of corporate services and chief legal officer, said the earliest that parts of the track could be removed is July 2014 and he estimated roughly \$10 million in investment would be needed to keep it operational.

Before part of the line can be discontinued, it will be offered for sale in early February to private interests and then to municipal, provincial and federal levels of government, as per the provisions of the Canada Transportation Act. They will have a five-month window to submit offers to purchase the middle section, should there be a desire to maintain rail service on the segment.

Gormick's report looked 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.

In the CN discussion was the suggestion of possibly having an experienced short-line operator come in to run the Newcastle subdivision if CN wasn't willing to invest in it. However, Gormick said that suggestion pertained to the entire line and it's not feasible for a private operator to maintain that small section of the track as there isn't enough traffic to make it worthwhile.

Likewise, the estimated \$10-million price tag would be too high for municipalities to cover, he said.

"It all falls to the feds through Via I would say at this point....It is now in the federal government's court," he said, noting the timing of this project is good, due to the upcoming federal election.

"Because it's unfortunate that decisions like this don't get made on the basis of sound planning, they get made on the basis of four-year election cycles."

Via Rail, through spokeswoman Mylene Belanger, has already told the Times & Transcript in a statement that the company "does not have the financial resources to acquire or maintain this section of track. If this section is abandoned, we will look into the commercial viability of all other alternatives for connecting between Halifax and Montreal, before adopting another route."

The company has also stated it will continue to operate its trains over the route as long as it's open and in safe working condition.

Gormick said recent train derailments in New Brunswick have proven the value of the line for not only passenger service, but also as an alternative route for freight. He also said there is benefit in the whole line being operational in terms of not forcing some shippers to have to "take a long route" to have their products arrive in some destinations, such as a shipment leaving from Bathurst and heading for Saint John.

He also believes that the 71 kilometres of track and \$10 million is not an awful lot especially when the federal government already owns other section of track throughout the country.

"I feel like I've become an honorary or adopted Maritimer and I look at it and my feeling is well jeez, if you'll spend money down here to take care of us in Central Canada, doesn't fairness call for you to do the same thing in the west or in the east or in the north?" said the Ontario-based consultant.

"You're all taxpayers and voters, you're all Canadians, shouldn't you have access to that kind of government assistance, using our own money? The people wanted it, so do it. And I have a feeling in the end (the federal government) will."

Gormick added that he thinks it's now time for MP's like Moncton-Riverview-Dieppe's Robert Goguen to "get very busy" on the file, although he questions how much they will ultimately be able to do.

He said this issue is on the radar of the Atlantic caucus, but progress can be difficult.

"I can tell you that MP's such as Robert go up to Ottawa with these concerns and this is a very lock-down, top-down government and the (prime minister's office) tells them to get lost. Go back to your constituents and tell them you're concerned and looking into it, but mind your own business. I've heard this from many MP's," he said. "As I often say the unfortunate thing today with this government is that MP's don't represent their constituents in Ottawa, they represent Ottawa to their constituents."

Gormick said he's in the past had great co-operation with the Atlantic caucus and Goguen, such as specific meetings where they asked him to deliver briefing notes.

"The only answer they got from the transportation minister was 'I'll do my best,'" Gormick said. "So I would say there is interest within the Atlantic caucus. Points to Robert Goguen, points to the Atlantic caucus. Now it's an Ottawa matter."

Ted Bartlett, the acting president of advocacy group Transport Action Atlantic, which hired Gormick to write his report, said he also believes Goguen represents "our best hope for getting some action on the file" in terms of the federal government.

"We're not talking about a big commitment of dollars here. When you consider that it costs about \$3 million to twin a single kilometre of highway, \$10 million over 10 years to keep a rail route open, it's not big bucks," he said. "Understandably I guess the cash-strapped province of New Brunswick has gone as far as it can, but I think it's time for somebody else to step up to the plate."

Bartlett said in CN's past mandate as a Crown corporation it's more likely they would have paid to have the whole rail line maintained in the interest of the public, but as an investor-owned corporation he said their priorities are different.

"It's understandable that CN wouldn't want to put any money into a stretch of track upon which there isn't a single solitary freight customer," he said. "The only use is Via Rail, so I guess (CN's) position is let Via pay. And Via say we don't have the money, so who ultimately pays? I guess the Government of Canada. I guess that's the direction in which the finger points at the moment."