

Without co-operation, transport report might be derailed

By Cole Hobson, Times & Transcript

Regional co-operation in trying to find solutions to New Brunswick's struggling rail industry is important, but it is merely a first step that will mean nothing without concrete action.

The report 'Revitalizing New Brunswick's Rail Sector' was released this week by transportation advocacy group Transport Action Atlantic, written by Ontario-based transportation consultant Greg Gormick, who has extensive experience in the industry.

It's a 177-page report that offers a series of recommendations in regards to Canadian National (CN) Railway's potential 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.

Amongst the recommendations are ways in which Via Rail's service could be returned to daily service, a suggestion to explore all ownership options for the CN track and to potentially follow models that have been successful in the United States and to attempt to revive Industrial Rail Services.

The report was funded back in May 2013 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.

Instantly, that level of co-operation between several prominent New Brunswick cities and towns, as well as an economic agency, should send a message to both the provincial and federal government of the importance of this issue. That importance was further hammered home when representatives from all these communities, and from EGM, attended the launch event to offer support for the report.

Moncton George LeBlanc in his speech at the report launch event noted that the importance of the rail industry to the province of New Brunswick and to the region is "emphasized and underlined" by the people who were in attendance, representing a large part of the region.

"The importance of the rail to Moncton is very well known to everyone and not overstated. Everyone knows what a significant role it has played in the development and the success and the prosperity of the City of Moncton, Greater Moncton and the region," he said.

But regardless of the co-operation, to date the views presented by this report and the people behind it have been at odds with some of the philosophies of those who are ultimately in position to make the decisions.

Transport Action Atlantic has long maintained that the October 2012 cuts to the Ocean — which runs between Halifax and Montreal — from six times weekly to three times weekly, were hugely detrimental and were a step toward eventual complete elimination of train service in this area.

The group has maintained that the train is there to provide a valuable service — primarily to the people between the end points who don't have any viable transportation alternatives — and removing the ability to travel somewhere and return in the same day is a death blow for the Ocean.

On the other hand, Via has consistently countered that the move was a business decision in response to a decreased ridership demand and in search of cost efficiencies.

That only provides further fuel to Transport Action Atlantic's fire, as logic would suggest that if you have less demand, you certainly won't help increase that by making the train less convenient. That has been reflected as well in lower ridership numbers and revenues for Via, although the company argues the route is now more efficient as the drop in revenues and ridership since the cutbacks is outweighed by the overall decrease in train frequency.

In addition, the government formed a Strategic Rail Asset Committee — which consists of representatives from CN, Via Rail, municipal, provincial and federal government — back in 2012. The goal of the committee was to examine options for the future of the Newcastle Subdivision line, which CN said had seen a great decrease in freight traffic and needed tens of millions of dollars in repairs and new business to continue to be viable.

At the time the Transport Action Atlantic report was being announced, Sean Finn, chief legal officer, executive VP of corporate services and corporate secretary for CN, and a member of the Strategic Rail Asset Committee, said he didn't see the point of the work being done by Mr. Gormick.

“I'm not too sure what the (Transport Action) study will give rise to that's not already been discussed at that table (of the Strategic Rail Asset Committee) and we're focused there, that's where the focus should be, that's where the expertise is,” he said in a May 2013 interview.

Likewise, members of TAA have criticized the Strategic Rail Asset Committee for a lack of concrete action, with Greg Gormick suggesting in May 2013 that the committee was “doing nothing.”

“They basically have brought foxes into the hen house. This committee is being controlled by CN and Via and we know what CN and Via's long-term objectives are when it comes to Atlantic Canada,” Mr. Gormick said at the time. “New Brunswick will be led by the nose. The ministry of transportation is filled with people who know less about railroading than my cat does.”

Despite the criticisms on both ends back in May, it is now those two sides that must collaborate if anything from ‘Revitalizing New Brunswick's Rail Sector’ is to be implemented.

The report penned by Mr. Gormick in fact calls on the municipalities who funded it, and others in the region, to demand more transparency, openness and involvement in the work that is going on with the Strategic Rail Asset Committee.

It remains to be seen what the government's response will be to this report and how it will mesh with the goals and eventual decisions made by the Strategic Rail Asset Committee.

Francis McGuire, CEO of Major Drilling, was a keynote speaker at the recently-held 2014 Greater Moncton Economic Summit. Mr. McGuire, a hugely successful local businessman, said it's good to come up with a good plan or idea, but if you don't know how you are going to implement it, you should forget about it.

Transport Action Atlantic, through Mr. Gormick, has presented several seemingly good ideas, as well as the proposed plans of implementation. Whether or not these are viable options will ultimately have to come down to the different levels of government, as well as CN and Via Rail.

Between this report and the work of the Strategic Rail Asset Committee, it seems the desire is there to preserve the rail industry in this region.

The framework is set, so now it's simply a matter of stepping up and acting on it.