

All Aboard Northern Ontario's Northeast Lynx - Update #2



By : Éric Boutilier

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EARLTON, ON
Ontario Northland Railway
Temagami Subdivision
Photo : Éric Boutilier



“A goal without a plan is just a wish.”

This quote by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry was what motivated me to establish All Aboard Northern Ontario (AANO), a grassroots advocacy group which has set out to produce a viable public passenger transportation solution for the region. When I volunteered to launch this project 18 months ago, I wanted to demonstrate to our elected officials that Northern Ontarians need to be able to get from A to B in a safe, affordable and reliable manner without resorting to the automobile or over-priced and uncertain air service.



WASHAGO, ON
Canadian National Railway
Bala Subdivision
Photo : Éric Boutilier

In its infinite wisdom, the previous provincial government concluded seven years ago that Northerners would be better off without the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission (ONTC) passenger train that then served communities between Cochrane and Toronto.

The *Northlander's* discontinuance profoundly affected how our seniors, students, medical patients and those with disabilities may access essential educational, employment, social and health-related opportunities, which are often not available in their hometowns.

I recognized it would be vital for the North to possess not just a desire to see the rail service restored, but a credible plan supported by data that could achieve this goal. That is why I reached out to veteran railway consultant and policy adviser Greg Gormick of On Track Strategies. As his numerous past projects have demonstrated, he could and would produce a well-respected, professional plan that could influence public policy and undo the damage done by the *Northlander's* 2012 discontinuance



COCHRANE, ON
Ontario Northland Railway
Devonshire Subdivision
Photo : Éric Boutilier

To compensate Greg for his services – which he agreed to provide at a highly-discounted non-government organization rate because he shares my concerns about Northeastern Ontario’s transportation destiny – AANO solicited donations from concerned individuals and stakeholders on the former *Northlander’s* route. Thanks to the generous contributions from the Temiskaming Municipal Association (TMA) and the Northeastern Ontario Municipal Association (NEOMA), our consultant began preparing ***Northeast Lynx***. It is a detailed conceptual plan for the restoration of rail passenger service on this route based on techniques and technologies applied successfully elsewhere, particularly on a wide array of U.S. rail corridors from Maine to California.

NEOMA
NORTHEASTERN ONTARIO
MUNICIPAL ASSOCIATION

TMA Temiskaming
Municipal
Association
REPRESENTING 24 MUNICIPALITIES ACROSS THE DISTRICT



In preparing the conceptual plan, Greg has drawn on the concepts, research and experienced advisers he had employed in the production of ***Southwest Lynx: Integrated High-Performance Passenger Transportation for Southwestern Ontario.***

Commissioned by Oxford County, this plan in modified form is a template for what is necessary to re-establish service on the ONTC route from Cochrane to Temiskaming, North Bay and Toronto. It employs what has come to be known in North America as the high-performance rail (HPR) concept. This entails not just new rail equipment and infrastructure upgrading, but also integration with connecting buses and vans, as well as urban transit. It is a seamless public transportation concept adaptable to all intercity corridors and their off-line markets.



Because HPR requires the use of rail lines shared with freight trains, ***Northeast Lynx*** takes into consideration both the impact on the freight services and the mutual benefits that can be derived from taking a balanced approach. Some of the U.S. corridors where HPR has been applied have resulted in major public and private benefits for the freight railways, which wouldn't have been generated if not for the trigger provided by the renewed and expanded passenger services

Central to this HPR concept are new approaches to governance and funding, which need to be applied at a regionalized level with the full financial support of the two upper levels of government, which have the means to generate the public funds required.

The full ***Southwest Lynx*** plan is available on Oxford County's website at:

http://www.oxfordcounty.ca/Portals/15/Documents/SpeakUpOxford/2018/SouthwestLynx/SouthwestLynx_20180627_e_version.pdf

Using this HPR approach, ***Northeast Lynx*** explores the underlying challenges and then presents solutions as follows:

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| (1) Flashpoint: <i>The Northlander's</i> Cancellation | (12) <i>Northeast Lynx</i> Funding Solutions |
| (2) Behind the <i>Northlander's</i> Demise | (13) <i>A Northeast Lynx Gateway Trade Corridor</i> |
| (3) Today's Northern Transportation Challenges | (14) Phase I: Interim Service Restoration |
| (4) Why Passenger Trains? | (15) Phase II: The Big Lynx
(Cochrane - North Bay - Toronto - London) |
| (5) The Lynx Incremental Solution | (16) Phase III: The Big Lynx + The Little Lynx
(North Bay - Toronto - Kitchener) |
| (6) The Lynx Trains | (17) <i>Northeast Lynx</i> Cost Comparison |
| (7) Lynx Strategic Infrastructure Investments | (18) Beyond <i>Northeast Lynx</i> Phase III |
| (8) Lynx Multi-Modal Hubs | (19) A Northern Ontario Lynx System |
| (9) Extending the Lynx's Reach | (20) Conclusions and Recommendations |
| (10) Branding and Selling <i>Northeast Lynx</i> | (21) Next Steps for <i>Northeast Lynx</i> |
| (11) Needed: A New Northern Governance Model | |



HUNTSVILLE, ON
Canadian National Railway
Newmarket Subdivision
Photo : Éric Boutilier

The complexities and unexpected complications involved in putting together this plan have, however, resulted in a need for additional resources. The biggest complication has been the simple fact that at virtually every step along the way, various parties have obstructed our progress either knowingly or unknowingly.



The first and most serious complication was the arbitrary cost limit placed on reviving the service formerly provided by the *Northlander*. During the provincial election campaign, the now in-power government said it would commit to \$30 million in one-time capital expenditures and a \$15-million annual operating subsidy.

Where these figures came from, no one can or will now say. Neither figure is accurate. The capital costs to revive the service on a sustainable, safe and cost-effective basis are considerably more than this amount. As well, the operating subsidy could be a bit lower than what was pledged, although that's difficult to determine accurately until such time as discussions occur between the ONTC and CN, the latter being the owner of the required infrastructure south of North Bay. CN is in no way eager to see the passenger service revived and they can legally set a track access charge so high as to make it unjustifiable – unless some inducements can be provided to make it worthwhile from CN's perspective.



Our consultant has travelled hundreds of kilometres to assess the infrastructure and operational condition of the route, as well as to meet with politicians and numerous rail professionals in North Bay, Ottawa, Toronto and elsewhere. His large network of advisers and peer reviewers goes all the way up to and includes a former Amtrak president with more than 40 years of senior rail and transit experience.

Over the past six months, I have personally travelled close to 5,000 kilometres at my own expense to attend dozens of meetings with representatives of various governments and funding agencies. With the exception of a few donors through our online fundraising platform, our requests for assistance have largely been ignored or dismissed south of Temagami. The reasons cited have ranged from limited budgets, the negative attitudes expressed by the upper levels of government, attempts to shift responsibility to other governments and agencies, or flat out disinterest in the project.

THE LYNX IS GETTING READY TO PROWL OUR NORTHERN RAILS!



Our NortheastLynx plan for the restoration of the Ontario Northland Railway's passenger trains from Cochrane to Temagami, North Bay and Toronto is nearing completion. Our work to date has already been shared with numerous provincial, municipal, First Nations and railway leaders, who like the looks and lines of our stealthy kitty and eagerly await its arrival.

However, our NortheastLynx plan has been more complex than anticipated. Its development has required considerably more experienced, professional input than originally expected to make it **purr-fect**. We are very close, but we're not quite there yet.

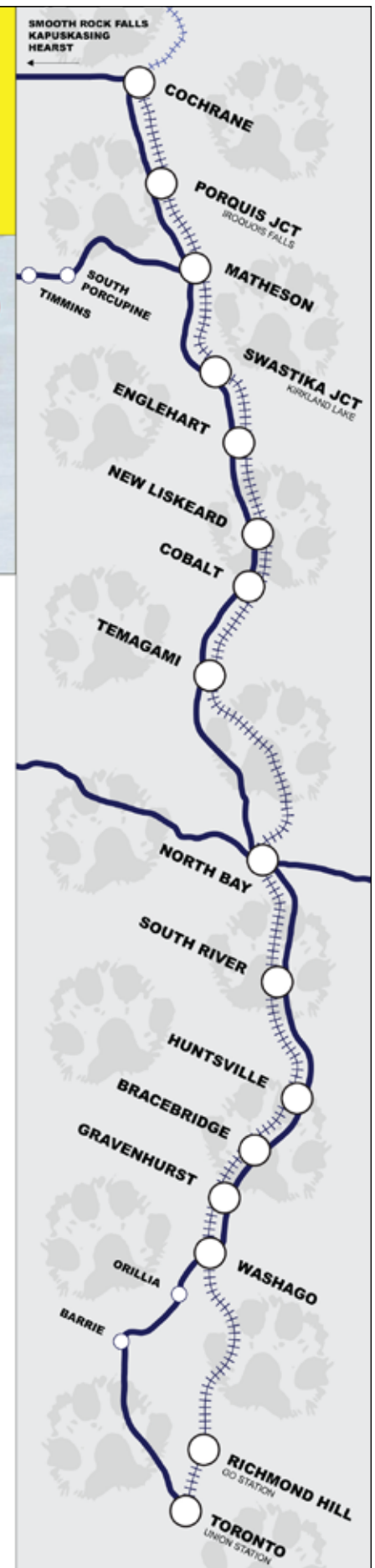
To get our Lynx to its destination, we are requesting assistance from all those Northeastern Ontarians who need and will make good use of the trendsettingly affordable rail passenger and connecting Lynx Cub bus services we are outlining in detail in the NortheastLynx plan. Our Lynx will not only generate substantial benefits right across its full route, it will also be applicable to other rail lines that now inadequately serve Ontarians in other parts of this great province.

If our Lynx is to be properly fed and groomed to win the approval we envision for it, then **please help support it by donating to All Aboard Northern Ontario's NortheastLynx campaign today.**

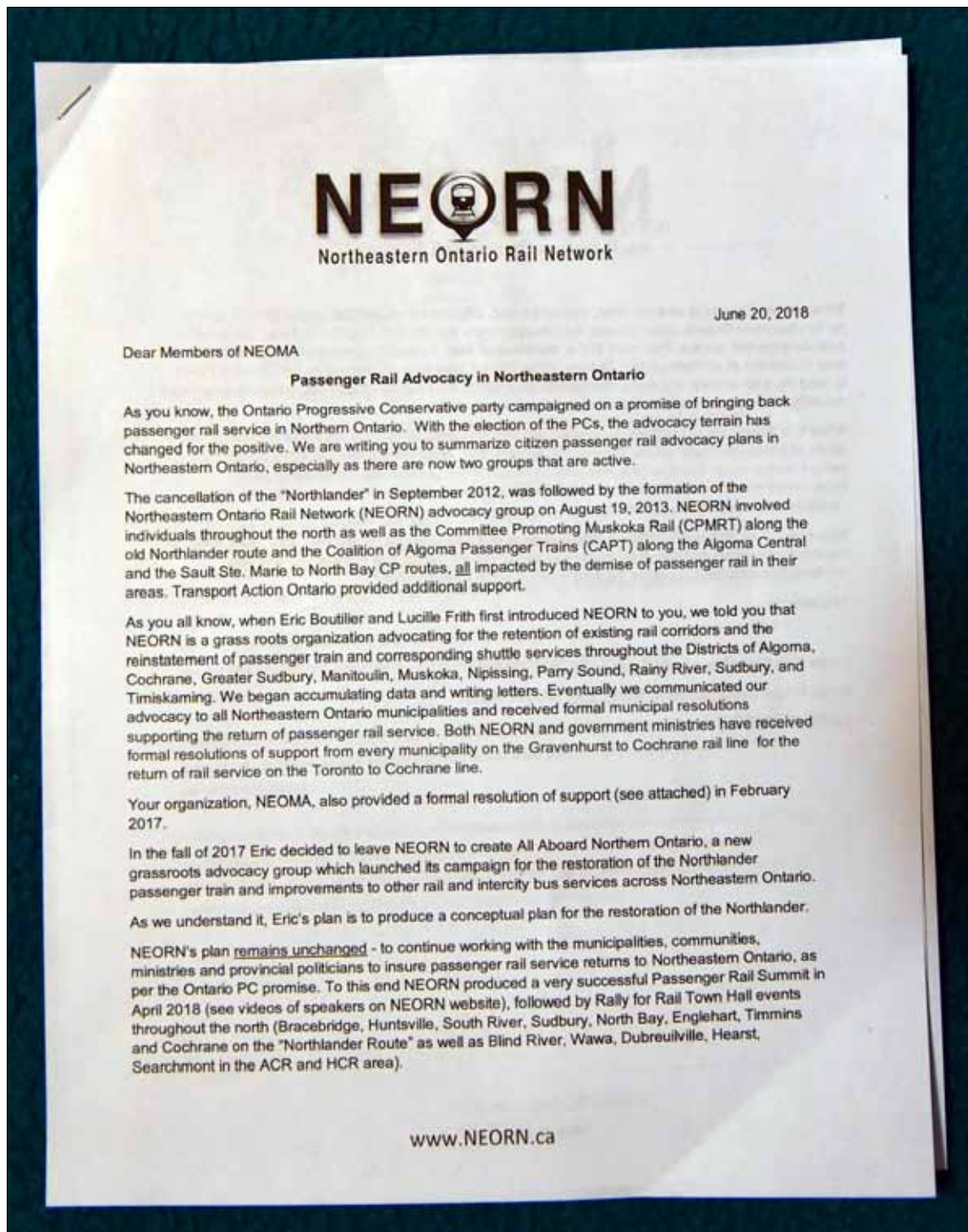
DONATE HERE : www.gofundme.com/all-aboard-northern-ontario



NORTHEASTLYNX
The North's Own Trains
- to meet the North's Own Need!



In addition to our fundraising difficulties, AANO has faced a number of obstacles related to the confusion caused by those presenting conflicting visions for rail service in the region. Coalitions – including one that is really just “a group of one” and not even based in what is defined as Northeastern Ontario – have cast themselves as rivals and attempted to obstruct our progress. This is only partially demonstrated by a letter they submitted days before our scheduled presentation to NEOMA (see attached document).



NEORN

Northeastern Ontario Rail Network

What we need to see is an innovative, interconnected, efficient and accessible passenger rail service for Northeastern Ontario using existing rail infrastructure – the NEORN LOOP – and we have been promised the first section, the return of the 'Northlander' train, by the PC government. This is the first step to connect all of Northeastern Ontario. While this will take time and money and connecting buses to feed the train service, residents and tourists alike will be afforded the opportunities to access some of the 90% of Ontario we call the 'North' while connecting us to the south.

While Eric Boutilier is not formally connected with NEORN, both our groups are working towards the return of passenger trains on the Toronto to Cochrane line. While having two advocacy groups may make a louder voice, this may present some confusion to the government bodies we hope will implement the much-needed services. The NEORN group would welcome Eric to rejoin – he has considerable knowledge to share.

Your resolutions of support for NEORN's work have had an impact, so please keep your voice heard for the return of passenger rail to Northeastern Ontario. NEORN would love to invite you and your residents to board the train within the next year! Wouldn't that be GREAT!

Respectfully

Lucille Frith (lakeofbays.lucille@gmail.com, 705 789 8903)

Howie Wilcox (williamwilcox48@gmail.com 705 942 9990)

Co-Chairs, NEORN

www.NEORN.ca



Photos : Éric Boutilier



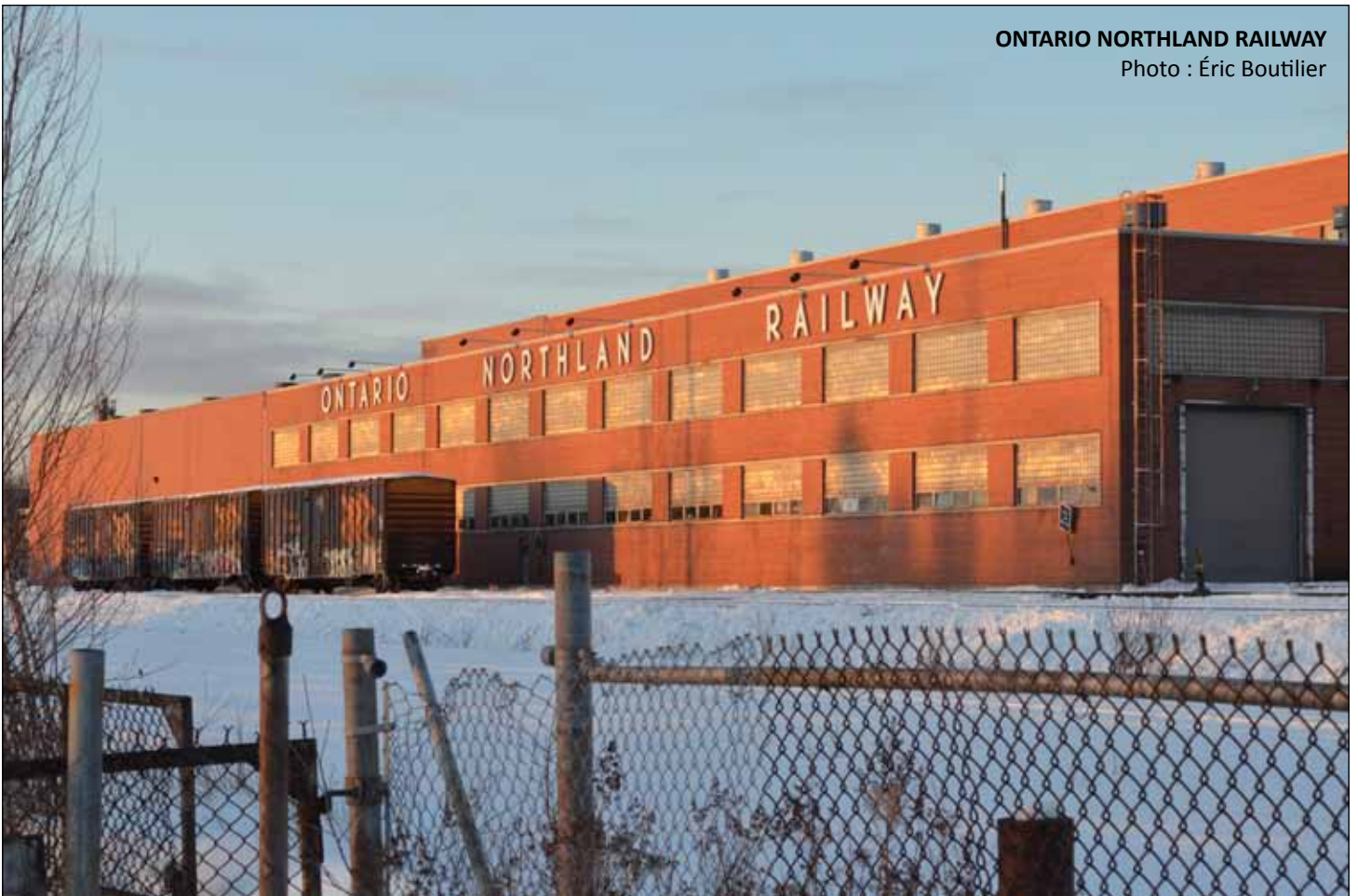
During the provincial election campaign, these four so-called advocacy groups combined forces to present a series of poorly-attended town hall meetings promoting the concept of a rail loop all across Northern Ontario, but missing some key markets, such as Sudbury-Toronto and Sudbury-Thunder Bay.

While some of their ideas are theoretically possible if given unlimited public funding and years of capital spending, these groups continue to promote an unrealistic vision of rail service here, there and everywhere on lines requiring massive infrastructure upgrading and, in the case of CN, reliant on the private property of a railway that has proven itself to be hostile to the presence of any passenger trains on its tracks



Worse than this obstructionism, a well-known northern politician who says he wants the ONTC rail passenger service revived has twice intervened in the potential funding and delivery of ***Northeast Lynx***.

The first time, it was an attempt to influence a supportive municipal politician to not sponsor an AANO funding request, for which he did later apologize. But he then went on to make an unsolicited offer to stage the ***Northeast Lynx*** launch event in North Bay – which would have removed a significant cost from our list – and then withdrew his offer of assistance at the last minute three months later.



As well, we must reluctantly observe that the ONTC's interest in reviving the passenger service has been half-hearted, at best. An ONTC senior executive has stated they didn't really support its return and their hope was that the local politician who aggressively promoted it during the provincial election campaign would also come to the conclusion that it was "a political land mine" that was best avoided.

ON BOARD THE NORTHLANDER

Photo : Éric Boutilier



It baffles us as to why something as publicly popular and relatively uncomplicated as the restoration of a rail passenger service for Northeastern Ontario should face so many roadblocks and such game playing. The need for improved public transportation is horrifyingly evident, especially at this time of the year with so many highway closures and serious accidents. Intercity public transportation is rapidly vanishing in this country at a time when the nations with which we compete are improving and expanding their integrated systems, which rely heavily on the very type of rail service being proposed in the ***Northeast Lynx*** plan.



Connecting motor coach services to Northwestern Ontario on Highways 11 and 17 have all but disappeared. The few remaining regional passenger trains have become infrequent, impractical, expensive and far too unreliable to offer an alternative to driving, which in many cases simply isn't even an alternative.

VIA Rail's *Canadian*, which serves Northern Ontario on the CN main line from Sudbury through Hornepayne, Longlac, Armstrong and Sioux Lookout, has been reduced to twice weekly. It is regularly hours late and sometimes as much as two days off its schedule.

Paradoxically, Northerners are getting older and in some instances choosing to leave their communities because they can no longer get around. Younger people look for opportunities and their eyes turn south.

PORCUPINE, ON
Ontario Northland Railway
Photo : Éric Boutilier



I remain convinced that a case can be made for restoring passenger rail along the former *Northlander's* route. However, I have learned that one must have deep pockets in order to affect change in a measurable way. As a result, our consultant – who has gone above and beyond his contemplated workload and time frame – is no longer able to continue work on the **Northeast Lynx** plan due to the exhaustion of our funds.



TEMAGAMI, ON
Ontario Northland Railway
Temagami Subdivision
Photo : Éric Boutilier

So, where does ***Northeast Lynx*** stand at the moment?

A last-ditch appeal has been made to the Ontario NDP for funding assistance. This was done on the basis of several northern MPPs and a member of their research department in Toronto showing considerable interest in the project, supporting it publicly and inquiring regularly as to its progress. The proposal put to the NDP is that their funding assistance would result in shared sponsorship credit with TMA, NEOMA and those individuals who have donated to the project. No editorial control would be granted by this sponsorship, merely the right to point out that they generously helped make the crafting of ***Northeast Lynx*** possible.

Indications so far are that party executives in Toronto feel the project is worthwhile, but not so worthwhile that they would financially assist in the completion of ***Northeast Lynx***.



Unless this situation changes or another benefactor appears, we have no recourse but to shut down the **Northeast Lynx** project, make available to our sponsors our incomplete and un-releasable work to date, and consider the project terminated.

It is with regret that I deliver this update report to you, especially considering the faith you placed in AANO to bring this completed, professional plan forward for public reaction and input, and political action. Not only would we be delighted to carry our **Northeast Lynx** plan through to completion, we believe it is vitally necessary. Our work has indicated no one else – including the new provincial government and the ONTC – is crafting anything close to a workable plan for the restoration of our northern rail service; some appear to be working to ensure it simply won't happen, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Therefore, we look forward to hearing the views of both TMA and NEOMA, and any solutions you may be able to provide in order to bring **Northeast Lynx** forward as the credible, sustainable and affordable solution we know it to be.

Éric Boutilier
Founder and Team Leader
All Aboard Northern Ontario
North Bay, Ontario

January 31, 2019