

Improving Passenger Rail Service in Lambton County and Southwestern Ontario

**Meeting with Transport Canada Staff – Oct. 11-13
Sarnia ON –MP Pat Davidson’s Office**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Passenger rail has many advantages in today’s world, which is why almost all advanced industrialized nations, except Canada, are investing heavily in improving this mode of transportation. We are asking the federal government for the following commitments:

- Increase the subsidy for VIA Rail back to a level that allows sustainment and growth regionally and nationally
- Initiate work on a National Rail Policy, followed by a VIA Rail Passenger Transportation Act
- Work cooperatively with the province of Ontario and local municipalities on a multimodal transportation strategy for South Western Ontario (SWO)
- Assist RAIL and other local NGO’s to develop a thrice daily service linking our SWO communities, starting with a two year pilot project

BACKGROUND:

We welcome you all here today, and express our appreciation to Ms. Davidson for arranging this meeting, and providing accommodations to facilitate same.

We represent RAIL (Rail Advocacy in Lambton), and over the past 5 months have advocated on behalf of the citizens of Sarnia and Lambton county, with our MP Pat Davidson, Bob Bailey MPP, met with VIA Rail, Minister of Transport Staff, circulated petitions, surveys, in protest over the VIA Rail service reductions of September 2012.

RAIL is working with many other non- government organizations in advocating for improvement of passenger rail in Ontario, such as Transport Action Ontario, Southwest Economic Assembly, SAVEVIA St. Marys ON , Northern and Eastern Ontario Rail Network, Coalition for Algoma Passenger Trains and CN Pensioners Association National Council. We believe we have tapped into a major grassroots issue, in that thousands of citizens are concerned about the demise of passenger rail in Canada.

As you are aware Lambton County (population 126,199) which Ms. Davidson represents in the House of Commons, is a victim of the VIA Rail service reductions of September 2012. The residents, both urban and rural, are totally isolated from transportation services for a period of 18 hours out of every 24. So as we begin, one might ask the question.....

Why Passenger Trains?

- Safest form of inter-city transportation
- Traffic congestion reduction
- Highest energy efficiency of all land modes
- Lowest environmental footprint of all modes
- Ease of accessibility for those with special mobility needs
- All weather travel
- Every \$1 million invested in rail passenger travel generates \$3 million in economic activity

For the above reasons, almost all industrialized countries except Canada, are investing heavily in passenger rail.

Rail Advocacy In Lambton
1086 Modeland Road, Building 1050, Suite 100
Sarnia, Ontario, Canada N7S 6L2
Contact: jhouston11@cogeco.ca

KEY ISSUES:

1. Every Effort Has Been Made to Downsize VIA Rail Canada – No More Can be Accomplished.

VIA Rail Canada is skeletonised to the point, that it is impossible to have a leaner operation. Continual reductions in funding from yours and previous governments, regardless of political stripe, has placed it in the position of being the third least effective Crown Corporation of the 49 in existence. Canada is the only G8 country in the world without a high speed rail program, and to all intents and purposes, there is not such a system in the foreseeable future. Other G8 countries are aggressively developing their rail-based inter-city and commuter systems. Canada has the 5th largest rail network in the world, and is not utilizing it to anywhere near full capacity.

Without major investment on the part of governments at all levels, the manufacturing, automotive, agriculture, and related economic sectors will struggle.

2. VIA Rail Needs Ongoing Investment – Not Reductions In Funding

Passenger rail transportation is capital intensive and downsizing the network, physical plant, and reducing service to the heartland of Canada is not conducive to increasing economic development. Efforts should be undertaken by the federal government, and VIA Rail to focus on ride quality, frequency, and safety, on time performance, amenities, station environments, local transit, and airport connectivity.

Virtually every passenger rail transportation system in the world operates with some form of additional investment, from multiple sources, government or the private sector. It is time that all three levels of government stepped up to the plate, and took responsibility for maintaining a viable sustainable rail transportation system.

While Amtrak in the USA is by no means at a high degree of viability or sustainability, when all three levels of government realized that their national transportation system was falling down around them, action was taken to correct some of the poorest operating corridors in the country. Today, while it is not a perfect system, there are 8 higher speed rail networks under construction or operating, and several lower speed networks operating, with ridership growing at a rapid rate. This improvement is a direct result of all three levels of government assuming a portion of the responsibility and cooperatively working to rebuild their national rail passenger system countrywide.

3. National Rail Policy

Transportation issues on a federal, provincial, and municipal level must be regulated through a National Rail Policy. Such a policy over the long term is an absolute necessity followed by a VIA Rail Passenger Transportation Act, and then a National Transportation Act. Such legislation cannot be implemented without the input and support of those that provide transportation services. These stakeholders include federal, provincial, and municipal governments, Class 1 railroads, VIA Rail, Ontario Northland Transportation Limited, (ONTL), Algoma Central, GO Transit-Metrolinx, regional and short line operators, rail labour, rail industry suppliers, and manufacturers, trucking companies, logistics providers, domestic and international freight shippers, and the associations that represent these groups.

4. Regional Transportation

Gridlock such as we are now experiencing cannot be allowed to continue, otherwise we will see our major highways, secondary highways, towns and cities come to a grinding halt. SWO must be supported by all levels of government in transportation and urban planning, as opposed to massive spending (while understandable in the GTHA on transit and subways). **Urban and rural Ontario does exist outside the perimeter of the GTHA.**

GO Transit system's regional network is an approach that we in urban and rural SWO want to see servicing the areas west of the GTHA. For the greater part such a network hub could be London. Regions

in the geographical area surrounding this city of 366,151 people could be served through whatever mode of transportation that proves to be sustainable over the long term. We can no longer ignore the transportation needs of Huron-Perth-Grey counties. This region has been isolated for many years as a result of the abolition of the many branch line rail services that served the region, and to some extent is further isolated due to reduction in the number of highway buses serving these areas. A viable transportation system must be formulated for both the southwest and central Ontario region.

Despite the fact that CN-CP, and to some extent VIA Rail itself, do not agree that Budd cars would be an effective resolution to the problems facing SWO, we feel that with directed investment, this mode of transportation, scheduled and marketed affordably, could be the solution to the issues we find ourselves facing today. Ongoing serious investigation relative to refurbishment of this type of vehicle or acquisition of a comparable unit should be aggressively pursued.

5. Connect Southwestern Ontario Cities with Thrice-Daily Service – Start with 2 Year Pilot Project

a. Background

As a result of the 2012 VIA Rail service reductions, our advocacy group has learned a good deal relative to transportation issues. We have worked diligently toward the formulation of a thrice daily (multi-modal) service facilitating Sarnia-London-Windsor connections at London for centers such as St. Marys-Stratford-Kitchener-Guelph, as well as Woodstock-Brantford-Aldershot-Oakville.

We have met with VIA Rail Canada asking for consideration of this project on a multi-year basis, (e.g. two year timeframe) and have been told this would be considered. VIA Rail has also indicated that if ridership on alternate or connecting transportation modes rose significantly, VIA would transition that traffic back to rail service.

SWO is the breadbasket of Ontario, indeed to some degree, Canada. Manufacturing, petrochemical, automotive, small business, farming, etc; all are present here in the great SW. It must be recognized that they pay the tax dollars to your government, as well as provincial and municipal governments. Declining numbers in the industrial sector can do nothing but jeopardize the population as a whole, and all levels of government will fall victim to such an economic disaster. People as well as industry migrate to cities served by rail transportation.

We recommend that this pilot project as described be allocated to the geographical area designated as SWO, (west of the perimeter of the GTHA) , for two years. Should it meet with success here, then it could be applied to other areas in Ontario that are experiencing transportation problems.

b. Scheduling

Business travel is not a source of ridership between Sarnia and London as VIA Rail does not provide convenient scheduling and frequency of service. Connections at London should allow access to not only St. Marys-Stratford-Kitchener-Guelph but also a connection with the Windsor – Toronto service that will allow access to stops at Woodstock-Brantford-Aldershot- (with GO bus connections to the Niagara Peninsula) and Oakville. Addressing this revision in service (which can easily be accomplished through a few minutes added or reduced to/from each trains schedule) will greatly increase opportunities for business travellers to be in Toronto at a reasonable time for morning meetings, and to facilitate connections to other modes of travel in and out of Toronto.

A connection ex Toronto that will facilitate business travellers to avail themselves of a late afternoon arrival in London and Sarnia and still connect with Chatham-Windsor services would be an easily marketable change which should produce successful results, over a period of two years.

It is our feeling that with three round trip connections at London serving Strathroy-Wyoming-Sarnia, as well as connecting service to Chatham-Windsor, Woodstock-Brantford-Aldershot-Oakville, ridership will increase due to a much more accessible service that will serve the needs of the region, much better than the stunted service that is presently operating, therefore well worthy of the Ministers consideration towards improved transportation in SWO.

c. Time frame for Implementation

With a concerted effort of all parties involved, this pilot project could be in place in under 1 year, with a target date of Sept. 1/14.

d. Funding Support

The aforementioned pilot project will require additional funding support for VIA Rail, from your Ministry, and from other levels of government to subsidize the cost of this project.

6. How Improved Passenger Rail can be Achieved in Canada

This will require sustained dialogue with VIA Rail and governments at all three levels working co-operatively. It will require a concerted effort from the grass roots advocacy groups. It will require a higher degree of cooperation among CN, CP and VIA Rail relative to tenancy use of their rights of way. It needs promotion of renewed awareness of rail travel and the service it can provide.

Lastly but by no means least, it needs a concerted effort of all concerned to establish National Rail Policy legislation covering freight, and passenger rail modes of travel in Canada. This includes assistance from advocacy groups with familiarity of the geographical area and understanding of the transportation requirements of the area. RAIL is one of those groups willing to make every effort possible, to assist in re-building a regional rail network in SWO.

7. Passengers Will Switch To Rail

Passengers will switch to rail when the combination of positive attributes such as safety, speed, reliability, comfort, and convenience outweigh the cost of transportation alternatives, i.e. when the whole package is viewed as preferable. Experience worldwide has shown that an intercity passenger rail system requires a sustained investment, as opposed to a \$41.6 million reduction in funding.

CONCLUSIONS:

We asked for this meeting today to impress upon you as representatives of the Minister that we here in Sarnia and indeed in SWO, are suffering significantly from the 2012 VIA Rail service reductions at both the urban and rural level. These reductions in service are imposing gross inconvenience on seniors, students back and forth to university and colleges in central and southwestern Ontario, family visits, business travellers, commuters to some degree. Through a concerted effort on three levels of government, on the part of VIA Rail, support from communities served, and certainly our committee as an advocacy group, we are convinced a drastic change in the travel habits of the residents of SWO could be the ultimate result. ***This result can only come about however, through a concerted team effort on the part of all concerned.*** Therefore we ask that you impress upon the Minister that this project can work with the support of all the partners involved and that ***we as the most affected parties are willing to give it our all to make it work.***