



TRANSPORT ACTION ONTARIO

(formerly Transport 2000 Ontario)

Advocating for Sustainable Public and Freight Transportation

Box 6418, Station "A" Toronto, ON M5W 1X3

Presentation to Standing Committee on General Government

Study Related to Traffic Congestion in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, The National Capital Region and Northern Ontario

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Increasing the Provincial Role in Intercity Passenger Rail and Bus Transportation

Introduction

Passenger rail is in trouble in Ontario.

The cutbacks by VIA Rail Canada in 2012, made in response to federal budget cuts, affected numerous cities in Southern and Northern Ontario by reducing service. This is just the last straw in a series of cutbacks that go back to the early 1980's. As an example, Sarnia, which used to have 4 roundtrip trains a day to Toronto in 1982 is now down to 1 train a day. Niagara Falls is down from 3 to 1. In addition, cuts were made to VIA service staff and many stations were closed. The 2013 federal budget is still being analyzed, but it likely that there are additional cutbacks to VIA contained therein.

And Northern Ontario is even worse off. VIA's Toronto-Sudbury service is only one train every 2nd or 3rd day, with incredibly inconvenient times. The provincially-owned Ontario Northland Railway service between Toronto and Cochrane was terminated completely in 2012.

Attachments 1 and 2 depict the Ontario passenger rail network in 1962 and 2012.

Bus service has also declined. In 2010, Greyhound, the major bus carrier, cut back or cancelled service to many middle-sized and smaller centres across the whole province. And concepts like coordination of service and schedules between bus and rail are largely unknown.

The Conundrum

It is difficult to fathom how these declines can be reconciled with the megatrends impacting our province and society. There are numerous economic, social and environmental factors at play that are increasing the need for more, not less intercity passenger rail and bus service. These include:

- Increased congestion in our larger metropolitan areas, costing the economy \$billions/year and requiring massive infrastructure investment. Rail has the potential to delay or avoid very costly expressway expansion in many parts of Southern Ontario.
- Increasing corporate tendency to locate and invest in cities with good transit and intercity connectivity by modes other than the automobile and short-haul flights.
- Increasing investment in improved US rail passenger service, including Michigan-Chicago and Niagara Falls-New York City, offering improved rail connectivity opportunities for Southern Ontario.
- Increasing cost of automobile ownership and operation, which now is about \$9,000/year.
- Aging demographics, with a larger percentage of the population being composed of seniors who show a preference for rail travel due to its comfort.
- Increasing interest in health care cost savings due to diversion of traffic from less safe modes, such as highways, and reduction in emissions affecting public health.
- Increasing concerns about greenhouse gas emissions and climate change. Rail and bus are much more energy efficient.

Canada is the only country in the G8 that is not investing heavily in intercity rail. Why are we going backwards versus the rest of the developed world?

“National Dream Renewed” Campaign

Because we are extremely alarmed by this trend of service reductions, Transport Action initiated a campaign called “National Dream Renewed” in mid 2012. It is designed to educate the public, the media and elected officials at all levels of government that “it doesn’t have to be so”. The longer term goal is to prepare a concrete vision of passenger rail and complementary bus service on a corridor-by-corridor or region-by-region basis that can be used by citizens and elected officials for advocacy.

The campaign involves holding town hall meetings in cities that have been or will be affected by these cuts. To date, in Ontario, we have held Town Halls in Sarnia, Stratford, Kitchener, Welland, Kingston, Sault Ste. Marie and Thunder Bay. We have also held a series of Town Halls in the Maritimes. Our next Town Hall is here in Toronto, next Saturday afternoon April 20 in conjunction with our Annual General Meeting.

The Town Halls have gone very well. They are normally facilitated by a local member of parliament or mayor or regional chair. They have received excellent media coverage (see Attachment 3) and public attendance from 50 to 150.

What we have heard is very sobering – real cases of individual economic hardship and well as personal hardship. Many people depended on the VIA or on the Ontario Northland trains to get to their jobs or visit their loved ones. The Toronto Star had a good article on this on March 17.

There is also economic hardship on a regional basis. Local mayors are concerned that their cities are being isolated and will lose jobs, residents and tourists. It is just incredible, for example, that Stratford does not have a convenient train for theatre-goers from the GTHA. And that residents of Kingston cannot easily go back and forth to Ottawa for a one day business trip.

Our most recent town hall meeting (Kingston, Saturday, April 6) was one of the best. There were two hours of presentations in the morning by student from Queen's University's School of Urban and Regional Planning. We heard many good ideas on how to improve VIA.

Transport Action has definitely tapped into a major groundswell of public discontent - economic hardship, personal tragedy and general outrage. Our goal is to make this an election issue, both federally and provincially.

What Can The Province Do

(a) Formal Agreement with the federal government on intercity passenger rail cooperation

VIA Rail Canada is a crown corporation under federal responsibility and so provinces have typically deferred all responsibility. But it doesn't have to be so. The federal government has increasingly become involved in urban and regional transit in Ontario by providing funding support. Similarly, the province of Ontario needs to get more involved in intercity passenger rail. There are precedents. Ontario has committed \$150 M to revive Peterborough-Toronto passenger rail. And of course, it has and continues to subsidize Ontario Northland Railway.

The US situation is informative. Amtrak operates under federal jurisdiction just as VIA does. But there is a formal mechanism for Amtrak to develop agreements or partnerships with individual states to improve a particular corridor of interest. This has led to 21 cases in 15 states where rail on a particular corridor was reinstated or improved. Attachment 4 gives an overview of this program.

In the USA, for denser corridors, fast and frequent train service with affordable fares proves to be the formula for success. For example, the Oakland-Sacramento (144km) Capitol Corridor of Amtrak, paid for by state funds - a corridor similar to London-Kitchener-Toronto - offers 15 trains a day at hourly intervals. Ridership on this service is over 1.5 million annually.

As a first step, Ontario should declare a **provincial interest** in restoring and improving intercity rail in Ontario. Discussions should start with the federal government on a mechanism where the two levels of government can cooperate to restore and improve service in key corridors or regions.

(b) Create a "Metrolinx North" to coordinate and support intercity rail and bus and ferry passenger travel in Northern Ontario

Ontario's cancellation of most of Ontario Northland's rail service and the potential divestiture of Ontario Northlands Transportation Commission (ONTC) is sending a disturbing signal in the wrong direction. There needs to be a stronger government presence, not less, in the North. The mission of Metrolinx-North would be to plan and support a coordinated passenger movement system with a rail spine, bus feeders and sensible intermodal hubs. For example, Sudbury has 2 VIA stations, a Greyhound bus terminal and a municipal transit terminal, all far apart from one another. Ferry service could also be part of the scope.

Funding for Metrolinx North could come from the new transportation funding tools, if made province-wide, that are currently being analyzed by Metrolinx for the GTHA.

(c) Declare a Provincial Interest in all upcoming Rail Line Abandonments

Ontario's rail network is rapidly disappearing. The major rail operators, CN and CP, are shutting down branch lines and often no level of government has seen fit to declare an interest and purchase the lines. Often these abandoned corridors are converted to public trails and lost forever as major transportation corridors.

For example, the recent abandonment of CP's Ottawa Valley Railroad from Smith's Falls to Mattawa is a national tragedy, particularly because a short-line operator was willing to step in to continue freight service, but could not reach financial agreement with CP. All of CP's transcontinental freight now passes next to two nuclear plants and through the congested GTHA, with an ever-present risk of corridor blockage.

In the long run, these corridors are national strategic advantages that must be retained. The Provincial Policy Statement (PPS) says as much. We ask rhetorically – would the Province ever abandon a highway corridor?

Ontario should take a lead from Quebec and de-facto declare a provincial interest in all future rail abandonments.

(d) Promote Operational Cooperation between VIA and GO Transit to Reduce Costs

Although VIA and GO Transit share schedule information, there is really little cooperation between these two crown corporations. In fact, there may be hostility, as VIA sees GO's rail service going further afield in the lucrative Greater Golden Horseshoe region.

The Queen's students identified numerous new ideas, including sharing rolling stock, improving the ease of physical connections at hubs, fare structure integration for both rail and bus, and complementary scheduling.

The province and federal governments are currently in an era of funding constraints and deficits. The Drummond Report specifically directed the province to find efficiencies in regional transportation networks.

In conclusion, there is much that the province can do in the area of improving intercity passenger rail and bus. We urge immediate action.

Attachment 2 – Ontario Passenger Rail Network, 2012



Attachment 3

National Dream Renewed Campaign in the Media

- **Toronto, Ontario**

- March 17, 2013 – Toronto Star
"VIA cuts hit small-town travellers: Southwestern Ontario feels pinch as federal budgets put squeeze on service," Tess Kalinowski, Transportation Reporter
[Toronto Star, March 17](#)

- **Ottawa, Ontario**

- <http://www.ipolitics.ca/2012/12/09/torymps-lobby-behind-the-scenes-for-communities-derailed-by-via-cuts/>

- **London, Ontario**

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- "Cuts to Via Rail's London service make little sense in a world trying to move from cars to mass transit." <http://www.lfpress.com/news/london/2012/06/27/19925256.html>
- Southwestern Ontario mayors are rightly concerned at VIA Rail's lack of consultation regarding the recent service cuts. Sarnia is taking a leading role in holding the senior leadership to account, with growing support from other municipalities, such as ST Catharines.
<http://www.lfpress.com/news/london/2012/07/18/19999126.html>
- "MP joins uphill fight against VIA Rail cuts" London Free Press.
<http://www.lfpress.com/news/london/2012/08/10/20091286.html>
- Consistently good coverage of our campaign in Southwestern Ontario by the London Free Press. This article RE the Town Hall in Stratford. <http://www.lfpress.com/ur/story/550705>
- "Thousands sign Rail Cut Petition." <http://www.lfpress.com/2012/11/09/thousands-sign-rail-cut-petition>

Stratford, Ontario

- "Local VIA line good as dead; speaker says" Our campaign is the lead story in the Stratford Beacon-Herald! <http://www.stratfordbeaconherald.com/2012/11/07/local-via-line-good-as-dead-speaker-says>

Waterloo Region, Ontario

- The cuts roll on; with some of the most rail-friendly built form in Canada, southwestern Ontario feels further pain from this year's VIA cuts. <http://www.therecord.com/news/local/article/822989-early-and-late-trains-back-and-forth-to-toronto-stop-wednesday>
- "If a country like Scotland that has about six million people can have trains criss-crossing the landscape every 15 minutes, then southern Ontario and the Greater Toronto Area should be able to do the same." Michael Copland, Participant at our Kitchener-Waterloo Town Hall meeting. Read about it in full on The Record. <http://www.therecord.com/news/local/article/824374-grassroots-group-calls-for-better-passenger-rail-service>

Thunder Bay, Ontario

- The upcoming Town Hall meeting on Saturday November 17th in Thunder Bay gets an important mention in the Chronicle-Journal this week: "Nuclear Waste, Passenger Rail". http://www.chroniclejournal.com/editorial/daily_editorial/2012-11-13/nuclear-waste-passenger-rail
- National Dream Renewed Thunder Bay Town Hall Workshop from this past Saturday, November 17th. <http://www.tbnewswatch.com/news/248153/Bring-it-back>

Windsor, Ontario

- Wonderful piece in the Windsor Star on the prospects for true high speed service in the Windsor-Quebec City corridor. <http://www.windsorstar.com/future/7592834/story.html>
- "More VIA cuts to come" <http://www.southwesternontario.ca/news/more-via-rail-cuts-to-come-says-speaker/>

St Catharines, Ontario

- "Niagara Commuters Want VIA Back" St Catharines Standard. <http://www.stcatharinesstandard.ca/2013/02/20/niagara-commuters-want-via-back>

Attachment 4 – Amtrak: State-Supported Corridor Trains: FY 2011-12

State Corridor Facts

- Amtrak's corridor services operate over a 6,000-mile route system and serve 23 states, primarily in the Northeast, Midwest and along the Pacific Coast. In FY 2011, 20 of the 27 state-supported corridor services set annual ridership records.
- Outside the Northeast Corridor, six corridors carry over a half million people annually, and five corridors carry over one million people. These corridors are:
 - *Cascades*—Vancouver-Seattle-Portland-Eugene
 - *Capitols*—San Jose-Oakland-Sacramento-Auburn
 - *Downeaster*—Boston-Portland, ME
 - *Hiawathas*—Chicago-Milwaukee
 - *Empire Service*—New York-Albany-Buffalo-Toronto
 - *Lincoln Service*—Chicago-St. Louis
 - *Newport News Service*—Washington-
 - *Keystones*—New York-Philadelphia-Harrisburg Newport News
 - *Wolverines*—Chicago-Detroit-Pontiac
 - *Pacific Surfliner*—San Diego-Los Angeles-San Luis Obispo
 - *San Joaquin*—Oakland-Fresno-Bakersfield
- Fifteen states provide some level of operating support for 21 different routes, with payments totaling over \$191 million in FY 2011.
- Many states (including California, Illinois, Oregon, New York, Pennsylvania and Washington) recognize the benefits of investing in corridor development and have spent substantial state funds to improve services with positive ridership results.

Funding of State Corridor Routes

Ever since Amtrak instituted service in 1971, it has contracted with states to operate additional state subsidized passenger rail service. Amtrak currently operates 21 state-supported routes in 15 states across the country. The states that contract with Amtrak are California, Illinois, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin.

Section 209 of the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 (PRIIA) required Amtrak to work with its state partners to establish a consistent cost-sharing methodology across all corridor routes of less than 750 miles, in order to ensure fair and equitable treatment of all states. Starting in late 2010, Amtrak and the Section 209 State Working Group, comprised of representatives from California, Maine, North Carolina, Virginia, and Wisconsin, developed a cost-sharing methodology that was approved by the Amtrak Board of Directors, ratified by 18 state governors as called for in PRIIA, and in March 2012 was approved for implementation by the Surface Transportation Board (STB).

Corridor Development

Improving trip times and increasing the number of trains on corridors connecting the nation's downtown business centers can significantly improve regional transportation, often at a fraction of the cost of expanding highway or airport capacity.

Amtrak's high-speed *Acela Express* service in the Northeast Corridor (NEC) between New York and Boston is an example of how corridor development can result in reduced trip times and increased market share. For example, the *Acela Express* travels from Washington to New York in approximately 2 hours 45 minutes and has helped Amtrak to capture 75% of the air-rail market share – up from 37% before the service was introduced. This demonstrates travelers will increasingly use a reliable, trip-time competitive alternative to vehicle congestion, and state corridors are beginning to see similar growth.

Sections 301, 302, and 501 of PRIIA provided over \$10 billion in capital grants for states and Amtrak under the High Speed Intercity Passenger Rail (HSIPR) program, funded both by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) and FY10 appropriations. Amtrak supported more than 200 applications for grant funds by 25 states. Outside the NEC, significant grant awards include:

- \$1.1 billion to Illinois for improvements to right of way between Chicago and St. Louis, raising speeds on the *Lincoln Service* to 110 mph and reducing trip time by 1 hour
- \$196.5 million to Michigan for track and signal improvements between Detroit and Kalamazoo, Michigan, raising speeds on the *Wolverines* and *Blue Water* to 110 mph
- \$35 million to the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority (NNEPRA) to extend the *Downeaster* service from Portland to Brunswick, Maine
- \$268 million to five Midwestern states for a joint purchase of 48 new bi-level rail cars and 7 locomotives to increase capacity on existing services.
- \$817 million to the states of Washington and Oregon for a range of upgrades, including new equipment, signal system upgrades, and additional track capacity.