



ALL ABOARD ST. MARYS



LEADING THE FIGHT FOR BETTER CANADIAN RAIL PASSENGER SERVICE – NOW!

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Search for new VIA Rail chairperson holds promise of real and long-overdue change

ST. MARYS, ONTARIO – The federal government has begun a search for a new chairperson for VIA Rail and that's cause for guarded optimism by the members of All Aboard St. Marys and Transport Action Ontario.

“We’re reading this as an indication that Ottawa wants to bring about some of the high-level change VIA has long required,” says Chris West of the All Aboard St. Marys citizens’ committee. “It’s our opinion that VIA has been rudderless for far too many years thanks to a board of directors appointed strictly on the basis of political patronage and not because they possessed any relevant knowledge of or enthusiasm for modern rail passenger service.”

The call for applications for the position may be viewed on the government’s website at:

<http://www.appointments-nominations.gc.ca/slctnPrCs.asp?menu=1&lang=eng&SelectionProcessId=E05CD4A8-81AA-4081-AC7D-B2FC5FB2E831>

Tony Turriffin, president of Transport Action Ontario, adds, “We’re not naïve about how this process operates. The current directors of VIA were all appointed by a previous government on a political basis and the current government will obviously want representatives on the boards of Crown corporations and public agencies who are aligned with them politically. However, in this case that creates a golden opportunity because the man who could easily fill this role, regardless of politics, is former Liberal Minister of Transport David Collenette.”

Mr. Collenette was a Liberal MP for nearly 30 years and he served as Minister of Transport from 1997 to 2004. As both Turriffin and West point out, Mr. Collenette is a firm believer in the need for a modern Canadian national rail passenger system. He is regarded in transportation circles as the only minister since VIA’s creation in 1977 who brought about meaningful and well-considered improvements to the service.

Currently, Mr. Collenette is completing his work as the senior advisor to the Government of Ontario on a proposed Southwestern Ontario high-speed rail passenger service. Throughout this assignment, he has been open and helpful to All Aboard St. Marys, Transport Action Ontario and other groups concerned about the future of region's rail passenger service.

As part of his work and on his own time, Mr. Collenette has travelled widely by train and seen how successful rail passenger systems are operated in other countries around the world. Furthermore, his extensive government experience would be a huge plus in enabling VIA to fully and effectively engage with those in Ottawa who ultimately control its destiny through their oversight and funding.

"An appointment such as this could truly be a turning point for rail passengers nationwide," says West. "But this board renewal process needs to go further. As the terms of the current directors expire, they must be replaced by professionals who possess the skills and enthusiasm required to finally turn VIA around. The first person we recommend the government appoint to serve alongside Mr. Collenette is former Amtrak president and TTC chief general manager David Gunn, who is now a resident of Cape Breton. His 40 years of service in the rail and transit industries would make him a unique asset to VIA at a time when its future is far from assured."

In this, Transport Action Ontario's Turriffin concurs: "The combination of Messrs. Collenette and Gunn would give VIA something it has never possessed, namely directors who know how to make a rail passenger service operate at both the political and practical levels. They could also foster some radically different approaches to our intercity transportation problems, including the need to bring the provincial governments into the discussion to produce cooperative, multi-modal solutions. As well, their appointment would send a strong signal that our government is serious when it says it wants to use transportation reform and investment to help address climate change and strengthen Canada economically and socially."

All Aboard St. Marys and Transport Action Ontario are calling on the government to weigh carefully the selection of VIA's next chairperson, as well as future board appointments. If candidates of the calibre of Messrs. Collenette and Gunn are selected, then VIA can be put on a sound and practical footing. But if political patronage once again triumphs, then VIA's chances of survival are meagre, as past experience has sadly demonstrated.

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