



IDEAS IN MOTION

TRANSPORT ACTION ATLANTIC

A vision for renewed VIA Rail service in the Maritimes

Passenger rail in Atlantic Canada today is a sorry remnant of what it used to be. For the past three decades it has been declining at a more precipitous rate than elsewhere in the VIA Rail system. In fact, portions of the Quebec City-Windsor corridor have, in recent years, seen significant improvement in both frequency and capacity.

The most recent setback for VIA's Maritime service came in October 2012, when the frequency of the region's sole remaining train was cut to just three times weekly, under the guise of being an "improvement" to better meet the public demand. VIA's then-CEO was insistent that the *Ocean* was primarily a tourism product – completely ignoring the realities of local needs and travel patterns. The train has suffered significant ridership losses and increasing operating costs since the cutback. VIA is now paying more to operate fewer trains, and its most recent corporate plan acknowledges that passengers in the Maritimes are being poorly served by the current schedule.

The tri-weekly operation eliminated the possibility of same-day returns to the Maritimes from Montreal, and one-day round trips to Moncton for residents of New Brunswick's North Shore – an important consideration for people who have few other public transportation options. The lack of frequency also rules out rail as a choice for weekend travel, and it limits its usefulness when severe winter conditions make other forms of transportation unreliable or impossible.

Frequency and reliability are key components to making passenger rail service viable. Transport Action Atlantic believes that a daily *Ocean* with equipment appropriate to meet market demand at different times of the year would be the most effective way to serve communities all along the route, as well to provide a quality seasonal tourism product.

The 2018 federal budget allocated funding for VIA to replace its entire Quebec City-Windsor corridor fleet, and an order for new trains has been placed with Siemens. This is an important step, but VIA's long distance equipment used on trains outside the Corridor is aging and in urgent need of replacement. A refurbishment program is underway for much of this stainless steel "Heritage Fleet" – some of which is more than 70 years old and has already been rebuilt several times. But there is concern that this is not sufficient as a long-term solution. The British-built Renaissance equipment currently used on the *Ocean* is nearing the end of its service life, and when it is removed there will likely not be sufficient capacity to meet peak season demand. The time has come to place priority on investigating options for new long distance rolling stock.

Extensive market research should guide both the acquisition of new passenger cars and refurbishment of the existing fleet. A variety of accommodation and onboard amenities should be available to accommodate various travel budgets, including an enhanced economy service for those willing to pay extra for additional comfort and personal space without the luxury pricing of sleeper class. Simply put, the product should meet the needs of the marketplace.

There is also the issue of track infrastructure. The total Montreal-Halifax travel time for the *Ocean* today is longer than it was in the era of steam locomotives – largely due to the deteriorated condition of CN's Newcastle Subdivision in northern New Brunswick. Passenger train speed is limited to just 30 miles per hour on a lengthy stretch of track where 70 mph was safely permitted less than 20 years ago. Federal investment several years ago was meant to improve the track, but the money has been spent and speeds have not been restored. Furthermore, there are frequent delays due to reduced siding capacity, particularly between Moncton and Halifax. Clearly, more investment is required, but in so doing the infrastructure owner needs to be held to account to ensure the outcome meets the intended objectives.

Canada does not end at Quebec City! Canadians outside of the corridor also deserve investment in modern passenger rail equipment and services.

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