The Bulletin

TRANSPORT ACTION ATLANTIC

FALL – WINTER 2020-2021

Pandemic – Part 2

Challenges and opportunities for public transportation

An up-and-coming regional airline arrives at an Atlantic airport that seems to be weathering COVID-19 better than most. PAL Airlines inaugurated a long-awaited direct service from St. John's with the landing of this DASH-8 at Moncton's Roméo LeBlanc International Airport on September 21. **The story begins on p. 34**

(PHOTO – PAL Airlines)

The *Bulletin* is published twice a year by Transport Action Atlantic
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www.transportactionatlantic.ca

MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

In anticipation of ongoing public health precautions, this year's Transport Action Atlantic **annual general meeting** will be held virtually using the ZOOM platform on Saturday, 15 May 2021, beginning at 1400.

The agenda includes annual reports and financial statements, appointment of an auditor, election of a board of directors, and any other business that may arise.

Current members of Transport Action Atlantic may nominate (with their consent) any other member in good standing for a position on the board. It is the board's responsibility to choose the executive officers. Nominations should be made in advance of the meeting, and may be submitted by mail to the TAA Nominating Committee, P.O. Box 268, Dartmouth NS B2Y 3Y3, or by e-mail to donlinmacleod@ns.sympatico.ca.

Besides the required business, we plan to include guest speakers focusing on critical public transportation issues in our region, with ample opportunity for questions and discussion. Please watch for further details on our website as this program is finalized. TAA members for whom we have an e-mail address will automatically receive an invitation to the meeting. Others who'd like to participate should request credentials by e-mail to atlantic@transportaction.ca. As always, our AGM is open to the general public and the media.

Advocacy in Action
(socially distanced, of course!)
-by Ted Bartlett

As we turn the corner into March of 2021, media outlets are overflowing with stories about the first anniversary of COVID-19's arrival in Canada. At Transport Action Atlantic we're focused not only on what is now, and has been for the past year, but what is to come. In this *Bulletin* you'll find a lot of viewpoints from a variety of sources, including TAA members, politicians, and pundits. But amidst all this turmoil, our overarching goals of convenient, affordable and sustainable public transportation for Atlantic Canadians have not changed one iota. The pandemic has certainly brought new challenges, but with it come opportunities. Let's explore and promote them to the fullest!

Public health restrictions have changed the way the whole world interacts, and we are no exception. Last fall, we used the now-ubiquitous online ZOOM platform to host our long-delayed 2020 annual general meeting – and it was deemed to be quite a success by all who participated. Your executive has already decided that we will do the same for 2021, and have scheduled the event for Saturday, May 15. Please watch our website for program details.

We have also used technology – sometimes as simple as the telephone – to maintain our lines of communication through the dark days of the pandemic. For example, we have had two online meetings with management of VIA Rail, and although we haven't learned a whole lot about their long-term plans, we have used the opportunity to further our concerns about the future of passenger rail in this region. Please see Tim Hayman's analysis of the corporation's latest Corporate Plan in the *Rail* section of this issue.

We have also had some extensive involvement on the political front since COVID's arrival – always at a safe social distance, of course. With elections in two provinces, as well as a new premier in Nova Scotia, there's been plenty to occupy our attention. Most recently, as reported elsewhere in these pages, we've continued to hammer away at another of our priority issues – Marine Atlantic ferry rates. Our leadership role in this is becoming more and more apparent to political leaders and the general public, as is our advocacy for public transit and intercity motorcoach. We're no longer perceived solely as an advocacy voice for passenger rail.

We've also consulted extensively with leaders in all modes of the transportation industry, offering our support where appropriate, and our comments where need be.

With the arrival of vaccines in sufficient quantity, we can now see a light at the end of the tunnel. But with it come both new opportunities and challenges. The need for an advocacy voice like ours has never been greater!

Restructuring our publication efforts

When a publication produced entirely by volunteers only appears twice a year, it's a tall order to keep the content current and avoid the ever-present risk of being overtaken by events. Over the past five years or so, we've endeavoured to make the *Bulletin* a valuable outlet for transportation news and opinion for our readers. While feedback has been generally positive, we've realized it's an uphill, perhaps futile, struggle to make this publication a go-to source for breaking news.

Taking some cues from Transport Action Canada and our counterparts in other regions, we've decided to try a somewhat different approach. In November, we launched a monthly online newsletter, under the somewhat prosaic banner *Atlantic Transport News*. This collection of current transportation news from around the region seeks to fill a need that just isn't possible with a biannual print publication. Our objective is to publish on (or shortly after) the first weekend of each month. Don't hold us to that – this is, after all, a project of entirely volunteer effort! But all members and/or readers can help us with this, by contributing content, be it news tips, updates of happenings in your area, newsworthy photos, or complete short stories.

With this initiative comes a change in direction for the *Bulletin*. In this issue you'll notice there's less emphasis on news content, and more on in-depth features, analysis and opinion. In an era where the overwhelming majority of our membership and other followers enjoy access to the Internet, we think this approach makes sense, although we recognize that most members still appreciate receiving a hard copy in the mail twice a year – a tangible symbol of their membership they can hold in their hands and read at leisure.

With five issues of the monthly newsletter under our belt, response has been generally positive. But please, let us know what you think. You may even have a suggestion for a more catchy name for this online publication, or some thoughts on how we can make the *Bulletin* a more appealing product and a more effective vehicle for promoting our agenda. But please don't forget all this is an effort of volunteers – and we don't have nearly enough of them. If you believe you have something to contribute, do not hesitate to step forward. TAA needs you!

Financial Report

The following financial report is provided to update on TAA's financial position at the end of 2020. A full audited financial report will be provided at the AGM.

Transport Action Atlantic
Income Statement December 31 2020

Income

Dues	$ 2,430.30 (Net) *Note: Half of dues collected go to National Office*	
Donations	$ 3,782.77	
Total Income		$ 6,213.07

Expenses

Total Expenses	$ 2,719.00
Net Income	$ 3,494.07
Cash In Bank (Feb. 21, 2021)	$ 5,279.29

-Donald R MacLeod
Treasurer

Opinion

Building Back Better: Pandemic should be a rallying call

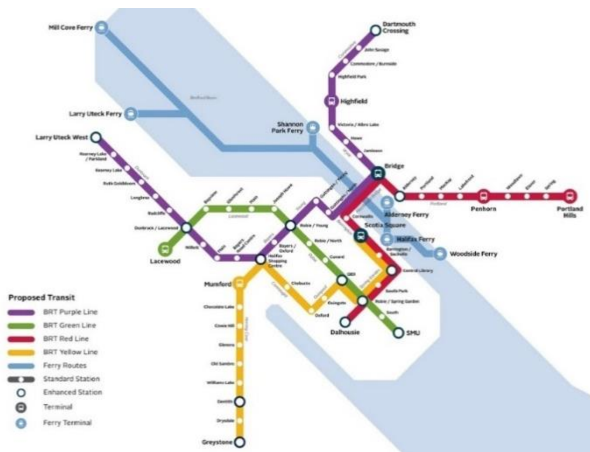
By Alex Glista

The COVID pandemic has hit the transportation sector especially hard, not only in Atlantic Canada but across the world. As stay-at-home orders were implemented and people got used to working at home, ridership of municipal and inter-city transit systems have plummeted. The long-term impacts of the work from home trend, and how long it will last, are still unknown. It is likely however that within the next few years, riders will once more be crowding into buses and trains for work, school, and leisure.

The COVID pandemic should not be an excuse for policy makers to stop investing in transportation. In fact, it should be a rallying call to build more efficient, clean, and frequent transportation networks across Atlantic Canada. The federal government recently announced a $14.9 billion transit fund, which starting in 2026, will provide $3 billion annually for transit projects. $5.9 billion of that pot will be dedicated shovel-ready projects, starting this year. Atlantic Canada needs to "seize the day" and advocate that important projects in the region get funding. Construction of transportation projects will not only help improve long-term passenger and freight mobility outcomes, but will help to put Atlantic Canadians to work during construction phases. Here are four regionally significant and funding-worthy projects that would help Atlantic Canada “build back better”.

Halifax BRT and Electric Buses:

Halifax is a growing city, which has seen a large population influx and construction boom over the past decade. In response to increasing congestion, and a desire from residents for better and more reliable transit, Halifax Regional Council endorsed a comprehensive rapid transit strategy in the spring of 2020. This includes four new BRT lines, connecting suburban Halifax to the downtown, and three new ferry terminals. It is projected that busses would run at least every 10 minutes, 7 days per week. This comprehensive network of transit would encourage Haligonians to get out of their cars, as well as incentivize developers to build dense and walkable transit-oriented communities along the new rapid transit corridors. This initiative is more than just improving transit, it is city-building at its best.



Along with its rapid transit strategy, Halifax is moving towards the electrification of its bus fleet. It hopes to eventually have 210 electric buses on the road. The cost of this transformative transit package is estimated to be $780 million over 8 years. Halifax envisions its financial contribution to be approximately $210 million, with the federal and provincial governments covering the remaining share. These two projects would represent a transit revolution for the Halifax Regional Municipality, and are exciting opportunities to build back better.

Modernizing VIA Rail Canada’s Halifax-Montreal Train:

COVID, and the establishment of travel restrictions into Canada’s Maritime provinces has meant the indefinite suspension of VIA Rail Canada’s Halifax to Montreal train. Post-pandemic, this vital inter-city rail service should not only be restored, but reimagined.

The first medium-term obstacle that this service faces is its aging rolling stock. In VIA Rail’s own corporate plan, the Crown Corporation acknowledges that its long distance fleet is nearing its end of life. First introduced in the 1950s, VIA’s iconic Budd-manufactured stainless steel rail cars have been rebuilt numerous times, but

70 years later have become a symbol of under-investment in VIA Rail. VIA is currently spending $989 million on a new fleet for the Quebec City-Windsor Corridor. It has ordered 32 new bi-directional trainsets from Siemens, which include Charger locomotives and Venture rail cars. VIA has an option to extend the contract and order more trainsets, but has not yet exercised it.

Part of building back better should include new trainsets for VIA's Maritime operations. Whether from Siemens or from another manufacturer, new trains are needed soon, and this obstacle should be addressed. Providing a minimum of three full trainsets for the Halifax to Montreal operations would allow for the reestablishment of daily train service. In addition to this, rail infrastructure upgrades could help to speed the service up and make it more attractive and reliable to riders. Upgrades such as continuous-weld rail on CN's Newcastle Subdivision in New Brunswick, or passing tracks on CN's Springhill Subdivision would help to ensure on-time performance and consistency for VIA's operations. New trains, daily service, and improved infrastructure are achievable and meaningful upgrades which should be seen as a priority for building back better rail service in the Maritimes.

Maritime Bus:

Maritime Bus, a private coach bus operator in Atlantic Canada, has been hit hard by the COVID pandemic. In 2019, the company carried 111,000 passengers. In 2020, that number plummeted to 69,000. Coach Atlantic, Maritime Bus' parent company saw its revenue decline by $33 million and lost $4.9 million in net revenue. With limited inter-city transit options, and the temporary discontinuance of VIA Rail's Montreal-Halifax train, Maritime Bus was essentially the only way for people without cars to travel between Atlantic Canada's towns and cities during the pandemic.

In early January, Maritime Bus proposed shutting down its Campbellton to Moncton, and Fredericton to Edmundston bus routes due to financial pressures and low ridership. In response, 21 senators from across the Maritimes wrote letters of support to the federal government urging that these services be supported. Due in part to this advocacy, $720,000 was provided to ensure that these critical routes could continue to operate.

This situation highlights that inter-city bus routes are critical links for the residents of Atlantic Canada. Unlike new rail service, bus routes are relatively inexpensive to establish and operate. During Atlantic Canada's pandemic recovery, governments should take a hard look at how new bus routes can be established, existing services can be supported, and how to integrate inter-city buses with other modes of transportation, like local transit and inter-city trains. Improved inter-city bus routes are an achievable and realistic goal, and should be a key part of building back better.

Cape Breton Rail:

A project which will not move people, rather cargo, is also worth of mentioning. In Sydney, Nova Scotia, a project called NovaPorte proposes building a mega container terminal to address increasing Canadian and North American import and export demands. With over 2000 acres of port and logistics facilities proposed, and shippers lined up to use the port, one critical piece of infrastructure is missing: rail access.

Since 2014, the Cape Breton and Central Nova Scotia Railway, a subsidiary of U.S.-based Genesee & Wyoming, has left its Sydney Subdivision dormant, with no trains running to Cape Breton Island. This disused rail corridor is the key to unlocking the potential of the NovaPorte proposal. The proposed plan is to reactivate and upgrade the corridor so that intermodal trains could serve the future port. The cost of this endeavour would be approximately $100 million and take two years of work. The backers of the Novaporte proposal are now soliciting public dollars for the project, which they claim would result in thousands of jobs and millions in tax revenue by enabling the port development.

Freight and short line railways are often forgotten when discussing infrastructure investments. Despite this, they are critical for reducing truck traffic, and subsequently wear and tear on roads. Moving freight by rail is also significantly more environmentally friendly than by truck, another selling point of this proposal. Restoring rail service to Cape Breton Island would be an exciting opportunity to meaningfully improve Nova Scotia's limited rail network, get trucks off the road, and potentially open the door to future passenger rail service on the island.

Alex Glista is a recent graduate of the Master of Planning program at Dalhousie University.

Commentary

We can get there from here – It just takes co-operation

A Vision for Public Transportation in the Maritimes

By David Coon

The old saying in downeast Maine that says, "You can't get there from here," nearly became reality for people needing to travel between northern and southern New Brunswick last month, unless they could drive.

The federal Crown corporation that provided passenger rail service between Campbellton, Moncton and Halifax stopped its trains from venturing east of Quebec last year. Next, PEI-based Maritime Bus came close to taking its buses off the road as the pandemic ate into its ridership. An 11th hour decision by Premier Higgs to provide a $750,000 grant kept the bus links between Fredericton and Edmundston, Moncton and Campbellton, and Fredericton and Moncton, for now.


In the extreme southwest of the province, the Higgs government has been funding the tiny summer tourist ferry between Campobello Island and Deer Island to provide service through the winter. This enables Campobello residents to avoid the long trip through the hot zone that America has become, while providing a link to the island for mainlanders who can no longer cross into the U.S. Service is spotty since it was never designed for the wind and seas that winter brings.

How has our public transportation network become so fragmented and brittle? Like Grand Manan and Deer Island, Campobello was once linked by ferry to the mainland. Commuter trains linked Fredericton and Saint John. Daily rail service linked North with South. Bus service was available just about wherever you lived.

The need for public transportation services is growing with an aging population, the rising cost of vehicle ownership and insurance, increasing numbers of immigrants, the regionalization of public services, and the imperative of cutting transportation-related carbon pollution.

With public transportation services in disarray, it’s as if there is no one in charge – which there isn’t. In fact, the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure has no mandate to oversee the coordination of public transportation services. No civil servant has that turf. New Brunswick has only ever had a highway strategy. There has never been an integrated transportation strategy.

This partly explains why New Brunswick hasn’t touched a dime of the $120 million in federal funding for public transportation projects allocated to the province as part of the ten-year $673 million infrastructure agreement that was signed with Ottawa in 2018.

There was no one to provide advice on how the transportation funding might be tailored to meet New Brunswick’s needs. A ten-year public transportation strategy written for government, on the initiative of the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, could have provided guidance, but it was gathering dust on a shelf. The infrastructure agreement with Ottawa got inked with $120 million for public transportation restricted for use by city transit services alone.

David Coon is leader of the New Brunswick Green Party and the MLA for Fredericton South. He is shown here addressing TAA's annual general meeting in 2017.

The Premier wants us to become more self-sufficient, but if you can't afford to own a vehicle or are unable to drive one, that self-sufficiency becomes an impossible goal. Just as deep cuts to our carbon footprint are impossible without shifting driving time to commuting time on a bus or train.

To achieve our social, economic and environmental goals we must become more self-sufficient in public transportation. How do we build a public transportation network that meets our needs, and what revenue will fund the necessary public investments?

This is a job for a public institution that crosses provincial borders. I propose the creation of a Maritime Transportation Authority, a regional Crown corporation, that can quarterback the development of a public transportation network that enables us to travel where we need to go, when we need to go, throughout the Maritimes.

I envision a seamless system of regional passenger rail, motor coach, and local transit services that are a mix of private, public and community enterprises. We already have PEI-based Maritime Bus delivering some bus services, which could be expanded. There are community-based transit services in some areas, ferry services in others, but no rail. It is time for a Maritime rail service to be knitted into the mix. One ticket should get you where you want to go, from door to door. Carbon tax revenues can help support operational costs.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is promising to spend nearly $15 billion on public transportation over the next eight years. Let us seize that opportunity for the Maritimes, together, to increase the well-being of our citizens and propel us toward a greener economy by breathing life into a serviceable public transportation network that we can count on to get us there from here.

From auto sprawl to transit towns

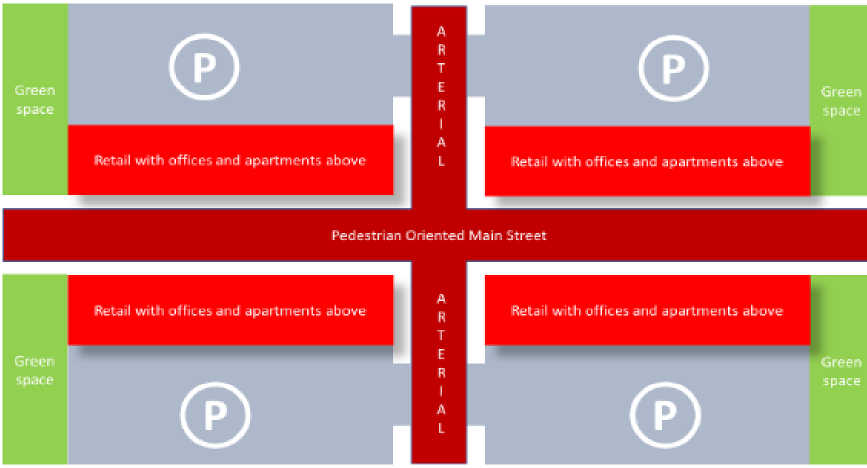
By Marcus Garnet

The sprawling, car-dependent, faceless suburbia that characterizes so many Canadian communities is not an inevitable outcome of free market forces. It is the product of hidden subsidies, restrictive zoning, roadway standards and commercial formulas. The resulting dystopia imposes public costs, degrades the environment and impedes access not only for pedestrians and transit users, but also for drivers who are faced with congested arterials, awkward driveways and the need to park multiple times.

St. Lambert, QC offers a clustered mix of commercial uses, community facilities and residential densities in a spine extending from its commuter rail station. Streets are laid out in a walkable grid with an attractive tree canopy.

Across North America, municipalities are re-working their plans and by-laws to encourage a more financially, environmentally and socially responsible development pattern. Often referred to as "Smart Growth", this aims to focus a mix of mutually supportive activities within walking distance of high-quality public transit. The planning emphasis shifts from limiting density and segregating uses, towards more flexibility to respond to shifting markets in return for greater control over the form and design of buildings and spaces. From a transportation standpoint, the emphasis shifts from attempting to eliminate congestion toward managing it, recognizing that without tolls, adding road capacity will simply attract more traffic and spur more dispersed development.

Emphasizing walkability calls for "Complete Communities" of compact land uses such as multi-family residential buildings, smaller stores, local offices and community facilities close to transit terminals. Lower-density housing and less variety of uses are located further away. In some locations, the edges of communities may be defined by linear parks offering corridors for recreation, ecological systems and wildlife. This approach helps to focus most development where it can benefit transit viability, and away from established residential neighbourhoods and sensitive environmental areas such as floodplains and wetlands.



Corner lots may be an opportunity for cars to access rear-yard parking directly from an arterial road, while pedestrian oriented frontage can be provided from a walkable commercial "main street" at right angles to the arterial road.

When focused around high-quality bus, train or ferry service, such communities are known as "Transit Oriented Development", or TOD. In many ways, TOD is a return to the characteristics of communities built before the 1950s, though today the need for automobile access must also be considered. This a balancing act, especially because modern retail must be easy to reach by car to be commercially viable, yet there is a growing desire to bring retail back to the sidewalk.

One way to address this, is to place buildings which include retail at intersections between arterial roads and collector streets. Parking and automobile access can then be located off the arterial, with the buildings themselves fronting the collector with shop windows and entrance foyers accessed from both the sidewalk and the parking behind.

Because TOD offers an attractive, pedestrian oriented setting with convenient access to a range of amenities, it typically commands higher prices, and often attracts relatively wealthy residents who may be reluctant to use the transit service itself. Although this can help pay for transit construction through higher property taxes, where old housing is redeveloped it can displace less affluent residents, and the higher price brackets may prevent people who are most likely to use the transit from living there.

In response to this dilemma, the concept of Equitable Transit Oriented Development, or eTOD, has arisen more recently. This involves greater effort in retaining existing housing and ensuring that some of the new housing is affordable to people with moderate incomes who are less likely to own multiple cars, and are more likely to benefit from the transit. There are no simple solutions, but several measures can help reduce affordability barriers for prospective residents:

- **"De-coupling" apartment rents from parking** gives residents the option to pay a lower rent if they do not have a car.
- **Reducing parking requirements and limiting parking:** Parking is costly to build, and households that do not use transit may be less attracted to dwellings which have only one parking space.
- **Including a range of housing types and rents:** Smaller units and less popular vantage points may command lower rents, while upper storeys may command high rents reflecting privacy and views.
- **Zoning that respects construction cost thresholds:** Building codes require costly non-combustible construction above a given number of stories. Height limits should bear these thresholds in mind.
- **Allowing extra floors in return for affordable housing:** Known as "bonus zoning", developers are allowed additional building height in return for committing a specific portion of units to remain below a price threshold for a set number of years.

There is much debate about what kind of transit modes can support TOD. Rather than insisting on any one mode, it is more useful to follow a "toolbox" approach. Permanent infrastructure gives landowners more confidence to develop around stops and stations. All-day, frequent or clockface-interval service facilitates usage and makes transit a realistic option. When competing with the comfort, convenience and image of the automobile, onboard accommodation and overall image must be considered. Transit that offers a positive experience rather than mere utility is more likely to attract discretionary users, including tourists. The Halifax ferries and Vancouver Skytrain come to mind.

Opponents of rail transit often cite high costs and lack of flexibility. On the other hand, if a transit mode is too flexible, it may not appear to be sufficiently permanent to attract development investors. Simplistic debates between Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) and Light Rail Transit (LRT) advocates overlook finer variations which may tip the balance in favour of either mode. To approximate the benefits of light rail, BRT should include significant segments of dedicated lanes, permanent and attractive stations and battery-electric traction.

Light rail can turn out to be heavy and expensive, so care must be taken to avoid over-engineering. In an effort to reduce rail transit costs, Ultralight Rail (ULRT) is being developed which uses bus-style coachwork and rails that do not require massive excavation or relocation of underground services. Ultralight Rail also takes advantage of battery-electric technology, as is already available for buses. A recent Canadian innovation proposes shallow troughs in the pavement to enable buses fitted with steel-rimmed wheels to ride on rails for portions of the route while using the road wheels to avoid blockages, turn tight corners or ascend steep hills. In the UK, a flywheel-assisted railbus has been reliably shuttling passengers along a short branch line for ten years, and its technology can be adapted for low platforms, narrow gauges or even temporary track. Other firms specialize in small trams used on public piers, and are beginning to offer their products to the wider transit market.

Along with BRT, such innovative options should make Transit Oriented Development a more attractive prospect for smaller cities. To help form travel habits early, it is important to have the transit service in place before the development is occupied. Without good transit available from the outset, residents will tend to buy cars and continue to use them even after the service has been introduced.

Daimler's vision for autonomous vehicles integrated into complete communities

Looking to the more distant future, strong transit corridors supporting compact, walkable, complete communities will help prepare cities for autonomous cars. Without such a framework for urban growth, and in the absence of road user charges, self-driving cars will lead to further sprawl and physical segregation.

Conversely, compact communities should enable autonomous cars to function as a service rather than a lifestyle commitment. Sufficient densities would enable any resident to summon an autonomous vehicle whenever and wherever needed. Fares could be set to encourage ride sharing and discourage car use where walking or transit are more suitable.

Marcus Garnet is a Planner with Halifax Regional Municipality, which has enabled him to study and advocate Transit Oriented Development through much of his career.

An economist's view:

Pandemic's blow to travel will reshape New Brunswick's future

By Herb Emery

Dr. Herb Emery is the Vaughan Chair in Regional Economics at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton. An earlier version of this commentary appeared in Brunswick News publications on January 13.

Who should be making decisions to guide the direction of the New Brunswick economy as we emerge out of the pandemic in year or two from now? Should it be the provincial government? Or should it be transportation companies with head offices not in New Brunswick?

Bad news for the province with respect to transportation services continued through the fall and winter. In January came the threat that the remaining bus services outside of the Moncton-Saint John-Fredericton triangle would be suspended, with the north of the province being most impacted. This followed the suspension of VIA Rail service which served the east and northeast of the province, and the suspension of air service to and from Saint John and Fredericton, and the loss of remaining air services in the north.

While it is appealing to simply blame the pandemic for imploding demand for travel, we have to remember that New Brunswick and the other Atlantic provinces made a choice to close our borders with more onerous travel restrictions for those coming to the province, or returning home to the province, than in the rest of Canada. The benefit of our "hide in our shells" strategy has been remaining relatively untouched by COVID-19 which has extended lives, has generated a boom in real estate that may still turn out to be a nasty bubble. But it could be a source of growth if we have the right broadband infrastructure to turn our province into a suburb of Toronto and Montreal… and transportation services. Many see our success in controlling COVID-19 infections as positive for the future of the economy.

The number of times I have heard New Brunswickers say "never let a crisis go to waste" since last March suggests that our success with controlling the spread of the virus has blinded us to the fact that there is a crisis that we need to deal with. The costs of hiding in our shells have been apparent for a while as the province's airports have been sounding the alarm bells around their financial predicaments, but they have largely encountered a lack of concern and even a cold-hearted suggestion to see if the province can do better going down to one airport. The provincial government has no direct role in such a decision as airports are run by local management and under federal jurisdiction. But the Province plays a big role in determining the vitality and survival of airports with many of its decisions, most recognizable lately with the exceptionally stringent travel restrictions.

As for bus service, it was reported in January that the province did not intend to coordinate with Nova Scotia and PEI to provide a subsidy to retain service to the north of the province through 2021. While the province has no issues with taxing for-profit companies, it apparently has a firm policy of not subsidizing for-profit companies suffering losses due to provincial government decisions. This could be spun as a failing of the for-profit business model where losses are real, unlike a money losing, subsidized Crown corporation or public utility which many residents of this province romanticize.

The complacency of New Brunswickers seems to suggest they believe that things like transportation services will bounce back when the pandemic ends and we start travelling again. Strangely this belief comes from an expectation that the federal government will use regulation of for-profit companies to create the effective subsidies for fully restoring our transportation routes. This of course flies in the face of the pre-COVID deregulation of service requirements for smaller population areas, aka rural Canada, with bus service and even air service. This federal government, and provincial governments in New Brunswick for at least 20 years, have favoured urban areas for development. Don't believe me? Read historian Richard Wilbur's annual reviews of New Brunswick politics and economics, and you will see it. Rural New Brunswick today is not even the same as rural New Brunswick 20 years ago, as most of what is called rural is in commuting range of a city, which was not the case when the forest industries, mining, agriculture and fishing were the focuses for growing the economy.

So can we trust airlines, bus companies, VIA Rail, and the federal government to restore transportation services to the province to the 2019 levels and locations that we had? No. First off, passenger transportation for air, rail and intercity travel by bus are subject to fixed costs that create scale economies, indivisibilities in services and network conditions that lead to markets with a small number of providers, and requiring sufficient revenue to maintain the required levels of services.

You can't easily do an Uber thing for planes or trains where you can have many available drivers on demand for individual customers. To recoup the fixed costs of flight you need have more travellers per trip, in and out on the backhaul. To maintain levels of services you need to have scheduled flights, bus and train trips, whether you have the seats sold or not, hoping that on average revenues cover costs or better. Profits are high on trunk lines, but branch lines can be added or trimmed depending on traffic. Airlines, passenger rail and bus companies have organized around these economic fundamentals to create hub and spoke service between centres over having circuitous "milk routes" with many stops along the way.

In southern Ontario, bus service has integrated to a large degree around the Toronto Pearson airport hub eliminating much of the demand for spokes or branchlines within two-hour drives of Toronto. Accessibility to Pearson outside of Toronto requires getting to an urban centre with bus transportation to the airport. Montreal to Windsor is well served by VIA “higher speed” rail centred on Union Station in Toronto which is connected to Pearson by the Union Pearson Express train. All this means that we could see our pre-COVID transportation services restored, or we could see our province close the gap with other provinces and move toward an integrated multi-modal provincial transportation system… focused on Moncton or perhaps Halifax.

If we leave the decisions for the timing and location of transportation services to for-profit companies, then they will make decisions in their best interests that will shape the growth of the New Brunswick. It is already happening. Air Canada has maintained a higher level of air service in terms of routes and flight frequency at Moncton. PAL airlines left Charlo airport for Moncton. Until the Province relented, Maritime Bus was threatening to terminate service north of Fredericton on Route 2 and North of Moncton along route 11 but retaining service for Moncton, Saint John and Fredericton. That makes sense if air service does not bounce back in Saint John and Fredericton since there will be higher demand for ground transportation to Moncton and Halifax. As that network is entrenched, then Air Canada can grow its services at a lower cost at Moncton or Halifax than by restoring routes to the other airports.

Airlines only care about your travel time and ground transportation costs if too many of us choose not fly because of them. But they already know the likely impact that those costs have on demand for air services versus the costs of maintaining more routes to help customers avoid those costs and sell more tickets on the margin. Proponents of a single airport for New Brunswick argue that this model will increase total fliers to and from the province, but they disagree on where that single airport should be. Air Canada, WestJet and Porter and other carriers don’t care about the stranded assets of airports losing service.
Leaving it to the for-profit companies to make the decisions that they need, or even counting on the federal government to look out for New Brunswick’s interests as it looks at a potentially large bankruptcy or bailout for airlines and other transportation companies really is a decision to bank the province’s future on the greater Moncton area.

You can’t really easily have head offices, tech companies or other exporting businesses without reasonable access to air services. Multinationals or other Canadian conglomerates that New Brunswickers seek to attract and retain have no particular preference over Saint John, Bathurst, or Moncton beyond their bottom line.

For the north of the province, its future will be based on a population that can afford to own and operate a car. In the absence of a bus or other ground transportation service, there is no way in or out, other than personal transportation. That is not going to be an advantage for attracting or retaining population or business and the relative competitiveness of the North will further deteriorate. Southern New Brunswick's population along Routes 1 and 2 have more security in their bus service and have reasonable access to Moncton and Halifax airports. If the province does not intervene to sustain transportation services to the north, and to Charlotte County, then that may be the tipping point that leaves them behind for good.

In 1971 University of Toronto economist Abraham Rotstein identified the development challenge for provincial governments around the recurring tension between allowing the market to determine what (and where) the province will produce, versus the government attempting to alter what the province produces and where in the province it is produced … "Creating employment opportunities in depressed regions is not an uppermost concern of either domestic or foreign entrepreneurs. But it is, and must remain, a concern of governments, federal and provincial".

In 1971, creating employment in depressed regions of Canada was a concern of the federal government, but as Donald Savoie has pointed out, it is no longer. Federal government priorities are really about creating employment in cities and supporting individuals and families in Canada, not the regions they live in. That means that it falls to the Government of New Brunswick to determine and protect the interests of the province. Maybe standing back and not intervening to make Moncton our Halifax is in the province's long run interest. But should we at least talk about that before just letting it happen?

Rail News

VIA's *Ocean* suspension continues

As we pass the anniversary of the beginning of the pandemic's impact on this country, we also marked the one year anniversary of VIA's *Ocean* service being suspended, as March 13, 2021 marked a year since the last train departed Halifax. With this anniversary arriving, uncertainty still remains about when the next train will actually run east of Quebec. VIA has most recently extended the cancellation of the *Ocean* through at least May 15, 2021. This continues the rolling pattern of recent months, where bookings for the next few months were first blocked and then outright cancelled as time approached. It also now guarantees that the earliest possible service resumption on the east coast will be the beginning of what would normally be the peak season for the year, though it's unlikely to be anything resembling the normal travel season, and leaves Atlantic Canada without passenger rail service for more than a year. It still remains to be seen what exactly the service offering will look like when the train does resume.

The exact date that service will actually resume still remains unclear. The passenger carrier continues to insist that it intends to resume service when it is safe to do so, but it is likely that this date will be dependent on when travel restrictions between Quebec and the Atlantic provinces ease – and that remains heavily dependent on COVID case numbers and dynamics between the provinces.

The historic VIA Rail station in Halifax sits conspicuously empty in the lead up to the normally busy holiday season, at that point more than 9 months after the service was suspended. A year has now passed without any passengers making use of this waiting room. (PHOTO – Tim Hayman)

VIA has also extended the modified service offering on the *Canadian*, with only one weekly departure west of Winnipeg and heavily modified onboard services, through the middle of May, and the Winnipeg-Churchill's economy-only service will also continue through that time. Meanwhile, further Corridor service reductions have rolled out in recent weeks in light of further restrictions in Ontario and Quebec. It's clear all across the country that the interruptions to VIA will be here for some time yet.

VIA's Corporate Plan acknowledges dire state of long distance train fleet

VIA recently released the summary of their 2020-2024 Corporate Plan. The full document can be found online at the following address:
https://www.viarail.ca/sites/all/files/media/pdfs/About_VIA/our-company/corporate-plan/Summary_2020-2024_Corporate_Plan.pdf

As usual, this provides a good look at the priorities of the railway over the coming years, and valuable insight into ongoing performance of the corporation. This latest plan has a few positive highlights – there continues to be optimism about the future of VIA's High Frequency Rail proposal, a new reservation system seems to be *finally* on the way, and for this end of the country, there is a further acknowledgement that VIA has settled on an operating model for the *Ocean* to continue service beyond the loss of the Halifax rail loop, even if the new bidirectional train may be a significant downgrade from what came before. There's also an acknowledgement of plans to return service to the Gaspé once track upgrades by the province of Quebec are complete – potentially within the period covered by this plan.

Unfortunately, any of the optimistic highlights are overshadowed by a more stark analysis of the state of VIA's operations outside the Corridor. Ongoing struggles with the host railways (primarily CN) have caused continued challenges with on time performance (OTP), especially in the west. On the *Canadian*, improvements in financial performance stemming from the introduction of Prestige Class several years ago have been wiped out by the OTP struggles, lengthened schedule, and accompanying reticence among tourist operators to book travel.

The British-built Renaissance equipment shown here is the VIA rolling stock in most urgent need of replacement, but the latest Corporate Plan finally acknowledges that the 70-year-old Budd stainless steel cars are now also reaching the end of their useful life. (PHOTO – Tim Hayman)

Undoubtedly the most significant concern in this plan is the acknowledgement of the dire state of the equipment serving on VIA's non-Corridor and long-distance routes. While VIA had previously committed to further refurbishment of the nearly 70 year old HEP equipment, structural issues discovered earlier in 2020 have cast doubt on the longevity of this fleet and options for further refurbishment – even forcing the cancellation of the comprehensive overhaul of a group of HEP1 coaches to modern accessibility standards.

To quote from the corporate plan: "*VIA Rail recognizes that despite the inherent quality of construction and intrinsic longevity of the stainless steel used, it is no longer reasonable to expect an extended service life from the Budd manufactured rolling stock equipment (HEP cars) that is approaching or has exceeded 70 years of age. At some point the effectiveness, usefulness and maintenance costs of any product will reach a point where replacement must be considered and unfortunately this also includes the HEP cars.*"

With this in mind, the plan states that "*VIA Rail will explore the replacement of its Long-Distance and Regional fleet*", requiring $14.6 million per year to maintain current state of good repair until a renewal program is approved.
The one silver lining here is that VIA is finally, publicly, acknowledging that there is a dire need to start the process to replace the non-Corridor fleet – something advocates like TAA and TAC have been emphasizing for years. With VIA now acknowledging this fact, there is potential that a case can be made to the federal government that new, modern, accessible, and reliable trains are important for every part of the country – not just the Corridor.
We can just hope it won't be too little, too late.

-Tim Hayman

Viewliner – a possible choice for VIA?

The message is clear in the latest five-year Corporate Plan. VIA Rail Canada has essentially run out of options for its long-haul fleet. Although they were built to last, after more than 65 years of faithful service the vintage former Canadian Pacific stainless steel cars have reached the point where their future is extremely limited. It's been found not feasible to retrofit them for yet another life extension. And perhaps even more critical is the state of the troublesome British-built Renaissance cars, all of which had been slated for retirement by the end of this year. So what is VIA to do?

It may not be the only possibility, but there's one seemingly obvious solution that could be implemented in relatively short order. It's a modernized version of proven technology, fully compatible with Canadian railway operating standards and practices, designed for service under northern winter conditions, and meets accessibility requirements for passengers with disabilities. And a production line for building it in four different versions already exists just across the border in upstate New York. It's called the Viewliner – and if VIA isn't taking a close look, it certainly should be.

Back in the 1980s Amtrak reached the conclusion that its so-called “heritage fleet” – stainless steel cars inherited from freight railroads when it was created in 1971 – was nearing the end of the line. Just before it went out of business in 1987, the Budd Company of Philadelphia (builder of the ex-CPR stainless steel cars) was contracted by Amtrak to provide the basic platform for a new generation of rolling stock. Amtrak completed three prototype cars (two sleepers and a dining car) at its own Beech Grove shops in Indiana, and tested them extensively before placing an order for the first 50 production models. The original Viewliner I cars have served reliably for 25 years, and an additional 25 newly-built Viewliner II sleepers are poised to enter service when the pandemic recovery takes hold.

A Viewliner sleeping car in the consist of Amtrak’s *Lakeshore Limited*. The upper-level windows of these next-generation cars allow top-berth roomette passengers to see the passing scenery.

The updated sleepers were part of a planned five-year order, placed with CAF USA in Elmira, New York, a fully-owned subsidiary of the Spanish company Construcciones y Auxiliar de Ferrocarriles. The $298-million US contract totalled 130 Viewliner II units – 55 baggage cars, 25 dining cars, 25 sleepers, and 25 baggage-dorms – with an option for up to 70 additional cars. Numerous production issues and consequent delays were encountered both on the manufacturing and project management fronts, but all were ultimately resolved to Amtrak’s apparent satisfaction. Final deliveries were supposed to have been completed in 2015, but the last few cars are only now being completed.

Bob Johnston, long-time passenger specialist with *Trains* magazine, describes the Viewliner concept as one of Amtrak’s greatest success stories, from the standpoints of reliability, comfortable ride, and passenger amenities. He credits the original successful design to the corporation’s homegrown engineering talent and a willingness to experiment, in seeking to redress shortcomings in both the heritage sleepers and the bilevel Superliners that replaced them on long distance western trains.

It is perhaps worth noting that leased Amtrak Superliners underwent a successful trial with VIA in western Canada back in the 1980s, but the government of the day refused to fund a recommended purchase. Instead, the former CPR cars were extensively refurbished, including installation of head-end power and retention toilets. To be fair, that decision did yield another 30 years of satisfactory service at reasonable cost – especially when compared with the ill-starred Renaissance cars. But nothing lasts forever.

Bob Johnston says the most striking innovation in the Viewliner sleepers was the creation of two-berth roomettes, complete with a double set of windows that gave upper berth occupants an expansive view of the nighttime world. There's even sufficient headroom in the top bunks to allow the passenger to actually sit up in bed.

An upper-berth passenger in an Amtrak Viewliner roomette has a full view of the world outside. (PHOTO – Bob Johnston)

The original Viewliner concept envisaged the development of the full range of passenger rolling stock on the same basic platform. Although Amtrak never did proceed with development of either a coach or lounge car design, the *Trains* journalist suggests there is no reason it couldn't be done, and agrees that a full line of long-haul equipment to meet VIA's future needs could be based on the proven Amtrak platform. Presumably, as Amtrak initiated the concept and completed the final design with its own expertise, production of additional cars could be licensed to any capable manufacturer. CAF would no doubt have some advantage, as they have a production facility already in place, but ordering more cars would not necessarily be tied to any one builder.

The message in VIA's latest Corporate Plan is crystal clear: the corporation's long-haul rolling stock crisis must be addressed without delay – there is no time to waste. There is at least one ready-made solutions that should be explored right now. And we need the political will to get the job done.

-Ted Bartlett

Push continues to save rail in Cape Breton

Provincial subsidy keeps rails in place another year

Concrete blocks this section of washed out track in Cape Breton, but no trains are going to attempt to run here any time soon. (PHOTO – Tom Ayers, CBC)

The rails across Cape Breton island still haven't seen a train since our last report, but they'll be staying in place for at least another year. On March 25, 2021, the Nova Scotia government announced another year of provincial subsidy to the Genesee and Wyoming owned Cape Breton and Central Nova Scotia Railway (CBNS) to keep the rails in place, an extension of an ongoing agreement that has ensured that the railway will refrain from proceeding with formal abandonment of the line. If there is ever to be a hope of restoring this rail line to active use, keeping it in place remains a critical interim solution.

At TAA's last AGM, held virtually in the fall of 2020, then Cape Breton Regional Municipality (CBRM) mayor Cecil Clarke spoke at some length about his support for the railway, and his vision for how a rehabilitated railway line would be essential not only for potential port development, but also for allowing local businesses in the Sydney area and beyond to have a reliable, cost effective way of shipping products in and out of the region. Throughout the years since the CBNS ended service, several local businesses have continued to express their interest in returning to rail, should the option once again present itself. Mayor Clarke also saw the potential in using the railway to facilitate a greater modal shift and reduce the truck traffic on Cape Breton's strained highways.

Indeed, these are major points that both TAA and the Cape Breton-based Scotia Rail Development Society have been making for several years. While a rail connection is undoubtedly critical to any major port development, the case of restoring rail service doesn't need to hinge entirely on that project moving ahead. Existing customers could return, and a restored rail line could serve to attract other new business to the region. Other options, like building a container transload facility in Sydney to allow Newfoundland-bound truck traffic to stay on rail instead of being transloaded to trucks at Moncton, could provide rail-supporting business while also taking a toll off highways, and helping to reduce the carbon emissions associated with transport that's already taking place across the province. The SRDS has been leading a push for funding from the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency to support exactly this kind of development.

The CBRM election took place the same day as TAA's fall 2020 AGM, and as fate would have it, his appearance at our meeting would be Mayor Clarke's last official function before losing the election. Despite the change in leadership, TAA has thus far been encouraged by comments from new Mayor Amanda McDougall, expressing similar support for the railway and its role in a greener transportation future for the region. In comments made to CBC News following the subsidy extension announcement, Mayor McDougall acknowledged that local businesses were making the case for the rail line regardless of whether the container terminal moving ahead, and spoke of the role a reinstated rail line could play in expanding the Cape Breton economy. We can hope that this support from various sides eventually culminates in more than just postponing the line's demise, and that trains will one day return to the shores of the Bras D'Or Lakes as they ply the rails to Sydney.

-Tim Hayman

Motorcoach and Transit

A narrow escape for northern NB bus service

Proposals developed for restoring national motorcoach network

Thousands of New Brunswickers came within a whisker of losing their only remaining public transportation link in January. Faced with mounting operating losses due to COVID-19, Maritime Bus announced indefinite closure of its services between Moncton and Campbellton and Fredericton and Edmundston, effective January 15, unless the provincial government was prepared to lend a helping hand. The deadline was subsequently extended to month-end to allow more time for a solution to be worked out.

Company founder Mike Cassidy, who came to the rescue after Acadian Lines abandoned its service in the Maritimes in 2012, has been providing line-haul motorcoach service ever since. However, he says, his passion for "public transit on provincial highways" has to be balanced with available financial resources. In April 2020 as the first wave of the pandemic took hold, Maritime Bus carried just 650 passengers – a dramatic plunge from 14,500 in the same month of 2019.

Saved by an eleventh-hour compromise, Maritime Bus leaves Moncton for Campbellton on February 1. PHOTO – Ted Bartlett

The three provincial governments provided a one-time grant at that point to help offset the company's losses, and indicated a willingness to negotiate an ongoing agreement for the duration of the crisis. The tentative deal to help cover the May to December deficit was concluded with officials of all three provinces, but Premier Blaine Higgs refused to endorse it, saying his government wasn't going to fund for-profit corporations. His position ignored the harsh reality that the company lost nearly $4 million on its line-haul operations in 2020 because of COVID-19 – not to mention the massive revenue losses when its charter operations were brought to a standstill by the pandemic.

Under pressure from a wide variety of interests (including Transport Action Atlantic), the government finally relented, and an eleventh-hour agreement kept the buses running. In a rare display of non-partisan solidarity, 21 senators from the Maritime provinces signed a letter to the Prime Minister urging help for the struggling industry. With a federal government contribution under the Safe Restart program on the table, the Province allocated some money through its Regional Development Corporation, and saved face by transferring the provincial share to the City of Edmundston to be passed on to Maritime Bus.

The northern municipalities, although pleased that a solution has been reached, were less than satisfied with the process. Apparently, this money was diverted from funding that the RDC was already holding for eventual distribution to towns and cities under the Safe Restart agreement, so the already cash-strapped municipal coffers were in effect paying for what they viewed as a provincial responsibility.

Maritime's Mr. Cassidy credited Local Government Minister Daniel Allain and Frédérick Dion of the Federation of Francophone Municipalities with brokering the eventual outcome, with the support of the senators and federal Intergovernmental Affairs Minister Dominic LeBlanc. Curiously, the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure apparently wasn't involved in the process at all.

Mr. Cassidy told TAA that the level of political action in all this was incredible, commenting that it isn't right to be so involved with politics when you are trying to save your company and industry, especially after the other two provinces agreed participate. Meanwhile, he is deeply concerned about the future of the motorcoach industry nation-wide, and is playing a leading role with other operators in an informal coalition to promote bus connectivity across Canada for both passengers and parcels post-COVID.

"Governments must understand that busing is part of the mobile infrastructure," he says, adding that it is important to get all the provinces to co-operate in building back a cohesive coast-to-coast network.

The plan developed by the group of motorcoach operators envisages a return to federal regulatory responsibility for protecting a national network of essential routes. This would include the restoration of interline reservations and package services across Canada, which have largely been lost since Greyhound pulled out of western Canada in 2018. The proposal was submitted to the federal government at the end of February.

Transport Action Canada has written to Omar Alghabra, the new Minister of Transport, and Minister of Infrastructure and Communities, Catherine McKenna, welcoming and supporting the recommendations of the coalition, and commending leaders in the motorcoach industry for their efforts to preserve essential services throughout the difficulties of the past year.

"They have risen to the challenge of preparing for an inclusive and robust recovery by envisioning the revival of a comprehensive network of bus services and connections with VIA Rail passenger train services, which leaves no Canadian behind," said TAC president Terry Johnson. "Mobility poverty is the root of many thorny public policy challenges. Access to healthcare has been one of the most critical uses of the public transport network over the past year. It also connects students to colleges and universities. Where regional public transport exists, it connects people with new job opportunities, and ensures employers have access to more potential employees, attracting investment that would not otherwise flow and creating more opportunities for young people to thrive in their home communities.”

Commentary

The Uncertain Future of Urban Transit in Atlantic Canada:

It doesn't have to be... Governments must intervene before it is too late

By Sheldon Phaneuf

Urban transit has not escaped the devastating effects of the global pandemic. Service levels have been cut to public transit systems throughout Atlantic Canada. Although there are some systems that have restored service, many remain operating at significantly reduced levels.

Fredericton 50-60%
Moncton 70%
Saint John 70%
St. John's 65-70%

Senior transit staff and municipal officials have been consistent with their messaging. “Service levels cannot be restored until ridership increases”. How can ridership increase if service is restricted?

There is a pivotal point at which the service cuts that were put in place in response to a temporary decrease in ridership begin to drive rider behaviour. Experts warn that public transit is on the verge of suffering long term consequences and refers to the phenomenon as a “death spiral”.

Ridership decreases. Revenues drop. Service is cut. Ridership further decreases because of a reduced service schedule...and the cycle continues.

If service cuts weren`t enough, the death spiral phenomenon is being further accelerated by passenger capacity restrictions, imposed by provincial health authorities in response to regional COVID-19 outbreaks. These restrictions are necessary to safeguard the health of passengers and transit workers, but the impact on transit systems already crippled by service cuts is overwhelming.

A small change in perspective leads to a significant change in point of view

We can no longer accept the argument from provincial and federal levels of government that urban transit is a "municipal problem". The fate of public transit cannot rest solely on the shoulders of the cities in which they operate. That does not mean municipal level governments can stand by and watch their transit systems fade into obscurity. The myopic view of public transit is rooted in the ill-informed assumptions of our city councillors, even those who call themselves “transit friendly”.

As long as public transit continues to be viewed as a reviled but necessary line item on municipal budgets, nothing will change. We need a fundamental shift away from the belief that public transit is a drain on municipal finances. Our elected officials must first come to terms with the fact that public transit will never pay for itself. Then they need to recognize that a full-service public transit system is an integral part of the municipal service infrastructure of any successful city. Public transit is an essential service.

Finally, they should consider the fact that public transit is one of the very few municipal services that “self-subsidize”. Public transit offsets its cost by generating revenue for city coffers. Imagine if other municipal services (road maintenance, waste collection, administrative support services, etc.) brought in $40 for every $100 they cost the city to operate, as public transit does. (Source: CUTA Revenue Cost Ratio Data 2018). Ironically, although public transit is one of the few city services to generate revenue, it’s often the first to suffer service cuts.

Public transit drives regional economic and population growth strategies

In the fall of 2020, the province of New Brunswick declined to participate in a federal relief program for municipal transit after misunderstanding who it was for and what it covered. Provinces were initially supposed to match federal dollars, but loopholes in the program resulted in provincial governments not having to put up any matching dollars. The New Brunswick government decided to fund municipal transit losses under the Federal Safe Restart program, but these funds were exclusively for pandemic related losses and no money was offered to help restore public transit service cuts.

The Nova Scotia provincial government accepted $16 million dollars under the public transit aid program. Coincidently, Halifax Transit returned to 100% full service in September 2020.

Our provincial leaders must pull their heads out of the sand and recognize the important role that public transit plays in regional economic and population growth. Population growth in Atlantic Canada is under threat from an aging population, low birth rates, high rates of out migration and low rates of interprovincial migration. In 2017, the federal government launched the Atlantic Immigration Pilot (AIP) to promote immigration in Atlantic Canada. Initial results are promising. In 2019, Atlantic Canada broke previous immigration records and welcomed 18,000 newcomers. These newcomers are professionals, entrepreneurs, working class and students and are typically drawn to the larger urban centres to which they are accustomed and that provide services like an efficient and affordable public transit system.

Public transit requires operational funding from all levels of government

In February 2021, the federal government announced almost $15 billion for public transit over the next eight years. This funding announcement exposes a crucial lack of understanding for what public transit needs to survive. The current federal and provincial investment strategy falls short. It fails to address the immediate and ongoing need for operational funding. Elected officials at all levels of government need to adjust their focus and consider the “return on investment” achieved through operational funding of public transit.

Sheldon Phaneuf is a bus operator at Codiac Transpo in Moncton, and a member of ATU Local 1290

Funding of public transit plays a vital role in supporting the social welfare network and provides mobility to our seniors, our low-income workers, and our students. Subsidizing efficient and affordable public transit systems will help drive a national strategy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Ongoing operational investment in public transit fuels regional economic and population growth. When our elected officials look through this lens, they will see what advocates of public transit see…and finally begin to understand the social, environmental, and economic benefits of investing in urban transit.

Transit and motorcoach drivers honoured for pandemic service

The John Pearce award is given annually to recognize outstanding contribution to public transportation in Atlantic Canada.

The front-line workers who have kept public transportation in Atlantic Canada rolling through COVID-19 have been recognized by Transport Action Atlantic. The annual John Pearce Award has been collectively conferred on all the transit and motorcoach drivers in the four provinces.

"These men and women have continued to report for duty without interruption during the pandemic in order to transport essential workers to their jobs and ensure mobility within their communities," says TAA president Ted Bartlett. "They faithfully fulfilled their daily responsibilities, and not without significant risk to their personal health and safety, despite all the precautions that had been put in place. For this reason, they were a logical choice for our 2020 award."

It came as welcome news to transit system managers throughout the region, as they continue to struggle under the burden of greatly reduced ridership revenue coupled with higher operating costs.

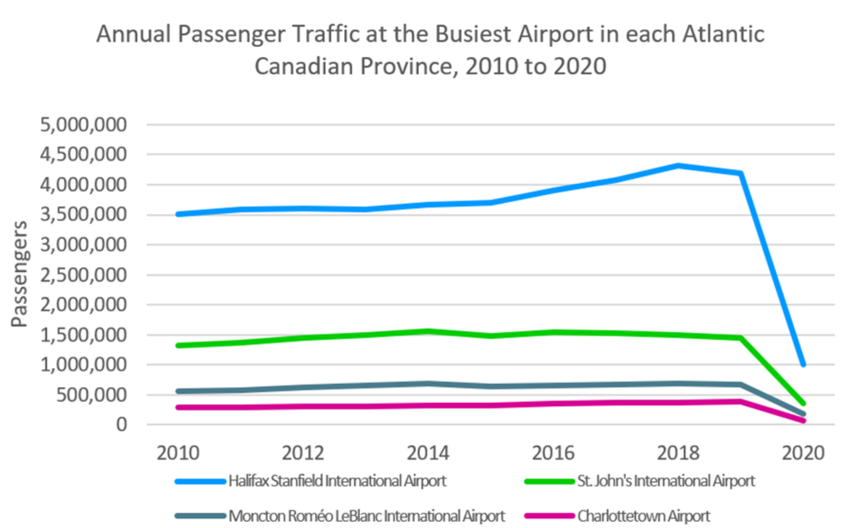
“Our bus operators and ferry crews’ pride in public service during COVID-19 has been exemplary,” said Dave Reage, executive director of Halifax Transit. “I am so proud of their ongoing commitment to our customers and community. Throughout these challenging times, they have worked together to keep Halifax moving!”

Judy Powell, general manager of Metrobus Transit in St. John’s commented “During this difficult time, they put our customers ahead of themselves to ensure the people of our communities could access essential goods and services.”

The John Pearce Award is given annually to recognize an outstanding contribution to the public transportation cause. It was created by TAA in 2017 to commemorate the lifetime achievements in transport advocacy by the late Mr. Pearce, a founding father of the association’s predecessor Transport 2000 Atlantic, a past president, and long-time member of the board.

Air

Tough times continue for aviation sector



Graphic by James Fraser

For those who absolutely must travel during the pandemic, restrictions notwithstanding, connecting to Atlantic Canada from elsewhere in the country has been growing ever more challenging. In response to plummeting ridership, airlines have slashed services, and the airport authorities that depend on landing charges and improvement fees paid by travellers for their revenue stream are severely feeling the pinch.

Service suspensions or cancellations accelerated with the arrival of 2021, as restrictions on discretionary travel showed no sign of subsiding. By mid-winter, Saint John, Fredericton, and Sydney had joined Stephenville and Bathurst on the list of airports totally devoid of scheduled passenger service. Air Canada had abandoned service to Gander and Labrador locations, and St. John's had lost its direct service to Toronto that had existed for decades. WestJet was reduced to a mere token presence in the region, and had announced that it was completely suspending service to and from St. John's for at least three months, effective March 19.

Even for those airports now totally deserted by Air Canada and WestJet, the bills still have to be paid as the runways must be kept open for general aviation and emergency medical flights. The total revenue loss for 2020 among members of the Atlantic Canada Airports Association is estimated a $140 million, which the ACAA says will have a substantial impact on cash flow and future financial viability, with a severe trickle-down effect on the respective communities. They're asking for federal government help to keep the lights on while they await the end of the pandemic. But even then, they aren't expecting a rapid recovery.

Meanwhile, a retired airline executive told CBC News that he isn't anticipating a quick resumption of the cancelled services once the pandemic subsides. Duncan Dee, former COO at Air Canada, said reactivating idle aircraft and personnel takes time, adding that he suspects management will take a "wait and see" attitude and evaluate demand at Moncton before making a decision on other New Brunswick airports.

The chambers of commerce in New Brunswick's three largest cities are not content to wait. They've joined together in a united campaign to oppose those who suggest that single airport scheduled passenger service for the entire province may prove to be the way of the future. That possibility was raised in the recent provincial budget speech. Moncton, Fredericton and Saint John were all profitable airports pre-pandemic, with a combined economic impact of $765 million, the chambers note, insisting that economic prosperity demands that scheduled service be returned to all three as the public health threat subsides.

As for the airlines, at this writing there appears to be substantial progress toward an eventual federal government financial rescue package – but it comes with conditions attached. Ottawa is insisting that to qualify for the assistance the carriers must agree to fully compensate passengers for flights they were unable to take because of the pandemic. It's anticipated that there will also be requirements to restore at least some of the suspended or cancelled routes, but details weren't clear as we went to press.

- Ted Bartlett

Small regional airline eyes growth amid pandemic

Amid all the pandemic gloom, and widespread slashing of airline routes in Atlantic Canada, one small but ambitious regional carrier sees opportunities and is moving to take advantage of them. St. John's-based PAL Airlines launched a long-awaited direct service to Moncton on September 21. The plan was for the 50-seat DASH-8 flight to operate five days a week, and initial customer response was quite positive, according to Janine Browne, PAL's director of business development and sales.

With an eye to expansion, PAL Airlines has added three 76-seat Q400 aircraft to its fleet. (PHOTO – PAL Airlines)

But then came the collapse of the Atlantic Bubble in November, which proved to be a substantial challenge. Then January brought an uptick in the COVID case count in New Brunswick, followed by a major surge in the St. John's area. PAL kept adjusting its schedule to meet ever-changing demand, and by early March had reduced the interprovincial run to a once-a-week basis with an intermediate stop at Deer Lake. Airline management is monitoring the situation closely, and is still confident there will be sufficient demand to eventually expand the operation to a daily basis. There are also plans to extend the St. John's-Moncton route to Ottawa once Atlantic region travel restrictions have been lifted.

PAL's Janine Browne accepted the "Opportunity Seeker Award" from the St. John's Board of Trade, recognizing the launch of the airline's new service between YYT and YQM. (PHOTO – St. John's Board of Trade)

A return to direct service between YYT and YQM is a goal both airports had been pursuing ever since the now-defunct CanJet exited the scheduled passenger business in 2006. The business community in both Moncton and St. John's were also supportive, and the St. John's Board of Trade recognized PAL's initiative during a unique virtual "Business Resilience Awards" ceremony on December 2. Ms. Browne accepted the Opportunity Seeker Award on behalf of the airline.

PAL is currently the only carrier providing service between points within Newfoundland and Labrador.
The airline has also positioned itself for post-pandemic growth with the recent addition of three 76-seat Bombardier Q400 aircraft to its fleet.

"We're really excited about this," Ms. Browne said. "This is going to make sure that we can meet the demands of Newfoundland, Labrador and eastern Canada, and be sure to fill any gaps that become available."

Opinion

Looking ahead to air travel in a post-pandemic world

By Woodrow French

The recent announcements of airline cuts because of COVID-19 have severely impacted the travelling public and airports throughout Atlantic Canada. The question is, will the airlines come back to our region's airports, and what services will they provide?

In Atlantic Canada we are at the end of the line, so to speak. On top of that, our population base is minimal compared to the rest of the country. We are used to getting lower capacity aircraft, shoddy service, and flight cancellations without notice. I have had many complaints about ticket prices, poor service, and lack of communication from the airlines. Other concerns revolve around the type of aircraft that are used on various runs in Atlantic Canada. A large number of complaints indicate that the public have concerns about the size of the cabin space, such as seat distancing or pitch, forcing knees to chest situations. In fairness to the airlines that serve our region, I have received fewer complaints since the implementation of the Airline Passengers Bill of Rights.

It is hard to predict what services we are going to receive, post COVID 19. The airlines are expected to evaluate each pre-pandemic route, and make their decisions based on previous experience and numbers of passengers per route. There is no doubt that most areas will see some form of service, but some won't – at least not until passenger demand warrants.

One important part of the equation is what airports are going to survive? Currently several airports in the Atlantic region are struggling to maintain services and to keep the lights on. One example is the airport in Gander NL. The CEO has done a great job keeping the public informed, but the loss has had a very significant impact, and they must rely on municipal, provincial or federal help. This assistance may or may not materialize. The travelling public may have to resort back to driving to St. John's, in all kinds of weather, to catch a flight. The situation will be similar for many other communities throughout the region.
We must look forward, and ensure that the level of air service in Atlantic Canada is equal to other areas of Canada. The onus will be on municipal and provincial leaders to fight to ensure that we are not left behind when it comes to travel by air. This won't be easy, because of the aftereffects of the pandemic on our economy. There is no doubt that we have a hard hill to climb when it comes to maintaining a level of air service that will meet our needs, especially in some of the less populated parts of our provinces. Only through strong leadership and good negotiations with the air carriers will we succeed in getting a level of services that meet the needs of our region.

The Airline Passengers Bill of Rights is another area that will require our focus as we go forward to recover air services. I will be corresponding with the federal minister of transport, asking that a citizen's representative be appointed to the Canadian Air Transport Agency to ensure that airlines accept the new regulations and incorporate them into their business plans.

As we restart air services throughout Canada, we have to ensure that we don't fall back into previous practices that made air travel a burden for passengers. I encourage the public, municipal leaders, members of our provincial governments and our federal members of Parliament to also write the minister of transport encouraging him to ensure that the Bill of Rights is continually improved so that the travelling public are treated with respect, and are adequately compensated for any inconveniences imposed on them by the airlines.

Canada's airlines are requesting the federal government provide financial assistance during these difficult times, and it looks like the government is ready to help. One interesting caveat is that people who advanced money for air travel that was cancelled will now receive a refund instead of a voucher if they desire. One small victory for the travelling public!

TAA member Woodrow French is a long-time leader in the airline passenger rights movement. A former mayor of the municipality of Conception Bay South, he lives in Kelligrews NL.

Marine

Yet another increase in Marine Atlantic rates

It appears that Transport Canada is totally without mercy in its demands for 65% cost recovery on the constitutional Newfoundland ferry service provided by Marine Atlantic – global pandemic notwithstanding. On February 1 the federal Crown corporation announced that most of its rates would be going up at the start of the next fiscal year, beginning in April. A company spokesman told NTV News that Marine Atlantic had failed to meet its financial targets in 2020 because of dramatically reduced passenger revenues, and had no option but to aim for making up the shortfall in 2021.

If you're planning on taking Marine Atlantic's Argentia ferry this summer, it's going to cost you more. The Crown corporation has announced that most of its rates will be increasing as of April 1, in order to satisfy Transport Canada demands for 65% cost recovery.

There will be no increase in passenger and passenger vehicle rates on the North Sydney- Port aux Basques route, but both passenger and commercial users of the seasonal Argentia route (where Transport Canada requires full recovery on marginal costs) will pay 2.5% more. That, of course, assumes that the service actually runs this summer. It was cancelled entirely for 2020, but reservations are now being accepted for two round trips a week beginning in late June, with the possibility of a third sailing being added should demand materialize.

But far more critical is the two percent increase for commercial traffic on the company's main route to Port aux Basques, coupled with a 3.4% hike in the drop trailer management fee. This is expected to have a noticeable impact on the cost of living on the island, as a large proportion of groceries and everyday household needs as well as building supplies are carried by drop trailers.

For the hospitality industry the fare hike comes at a particularly inopportune time. In the aftermath of COVID-19, with air transportation in serious crisis and unlikely to recover in the near future, affordable ferry service will be particularly important to the struggling tourism sector. If the Atlantic Bubble is restored by summer 2021, Marine Atlantic will be uniquely positioned to bring significant numbers of visitors from the Maritimes – if the price is right.

With no expectation the rate increase was imminent, Transport Action Atlantic had initiated an effort to get ferry rates on the table as an issue in the Newfoundland and Labrador provincial election. Although the service is clearly a federal responsibility, TAA believes the issue will only be addressed if there is a strong protest from provincial politicians. Accordingly, the parties had been asked to present their positions by answering two questions:

(1) Does your party support the principle that the ferry service between Port aux Basques and North Sydney is a part of the Trans Canada Highway, and as such the cost to users should be comparable to travelling the equivalent distance by road?

(2) Regardless of the outcome of the February 13 provincial election, will your party demand a full review of the existing Marine Atlantic ferry rates to ensure that the Government of Canada is compliant with the spirit of the 1949 Terms of Union?

A response from incumbent Premier Andrew Furey's Liberal Party was non-committal. It seemed to indicate that they are not prepared to antagonize their federal counterparts, and suggests that they do not consider the current rate structure unreasonable:

"Through ongoing meetings and consultations as well as an ongoing open dialogue with the Government of Canada, we continue to make the case that ferry rates should be set so as to not have any negative impact on business, trade and tourism. We continue to be committed to that approach and will call for a rate review at every possible opportunity," said a party statement.

The PC Party, however, was clear in its support of TAA's position. Leader Ches Crosbie wrote "Marine Atlantic is the responsibility of the federal government. But that does not mean I cannot stand up and hold them accountable. The federal government should ensure that Marine Atlantic provides affordable and reliable service…it is their constitutional responsibility to do so.

"…Yes, I do support the principle that the cost to use the ferry service between Port aux Basques and North Sydney should be comparable to the cost incurred to travel a similar distance via road," he continued. "Additionally, regardless of the election result, I will support a full review of the existing Marine Atlantic rates to ensure that the federal government is compliant with the Terms of Union."

The provincial NDP did not respond to TAA's invitation, but the party's only MP from Atlantic Canada raised the issue in the Commons question period on March 9. Jack Harris (St. John's East) followed up with medias interviews on the subject.

Meanwhile, Municipalities Newfoundland and Labrador has also become involved in the campaign for action on ferry rates.

Yarmouth ferry to sit idle for another season

Financial secrets revealed

It will be at least another year until the international ferry service between Yarmouth and Maine resumes. On February 1, the provincial government announced that the entire 2021 sailing season would be cancelled, citing ongoing COVID concerns, continued international border restrictions, and the likelihood that a critical percentage of the general population will not be vaccinated until the summer. The move is anticipated to save on certain costs such as marketing and season preparations and hiring crew, which would otherwise have taken place if the season was scheduled and later postponed or canceled. Still, there will be certain fixed costs to keep up basic maintenance and infrastructure work in the interim.

This will be the third year in a row that the high-speed Cat ferry will sit idle. The service for the 2019 season was slated to move its American terminus to Bar Harbor after previously serving Portland, but the move ran into hurdles with the completion of the new American facility, resulting in repeated postponements and then full cancellation of the season. With the terminal then complete, the 2020 season was anticipated to see a return, but COVID restrictions once again caused postponements and an eventual cancellation of the full season.

The unique shape of the Cat ferry looms over the Yarmouth waterfront, a sight that now hasn't been seen for several years. (PHOTO – Tim Hayman)

While the ferry continues to sit idle, new details have finally come to light regarding the amounts that the Nova Scotia provincial government has been paying Bay Ferries to operate the service. The provincial PC opposition has been pushing the McNeil government for several years to disclose the exact amounts involved in the management fee paid by the province, a demand that both the government and Bay Ferries claimed would risk damage to the company's competitive position by revealing commercially sensitive information. The matter was ultimately decided by the Nova Scotia Supreme Court, who ruled in February that these arguments didn't hold water.

Roughly a week after the court ruling, Bay Ferries put any questions of potential appeals to bed by releasing the information to the public. According to the newly released information, the deal signed in 2018 sees Bay Ferries paid $97,500 a month, for a total of $1.17 million per year. This was adjusted upward from the original 2016 agreement, which only saw payments of $65,000 a month. The agreement also includes incentives that would allow the company to earn up to double the management fee in a given year based on the achievement of certain performance grades, though this has not yet happened. According to the release from Bay Ferries, the total management fee accounts for approximately 5% of all ferry operating costs in a typical year.

Court challenge contemplated over Campobello ferry

Campobello Island is continuing its struggle for a year-round ferry connection with the New Brunswick mainland. The seasonal ferry service to Deer Island has been extended, seemingly on a month-by-month basis, through the fall and winter to allow the island's 800 permanent residents an alternative to travelling through US territory to access services in their home province. However, the provincial government evidently has no enthusiasm for maintaining this service on a year-round basis, making it clear that the extension is a one-time response to the COVID-19 crisis.

The Campobello ferry normally runs only in summer, and was not designed for operation under winter conditions. PHOTO – Maurice Haddon

The ferry is actually a tug and barge operation, intended for use under summer weather and sea conditions. The extended service has been scheduled to operate four days a week, but for practical purposes it has actually managed to run only about twice weekly. The most recent announcement extended the ferry until early April, with provincial Transportation Minister Jill Green suggesting it will end when the pandemic threat subsides.

But the campaign may yet find its way to the Supreme Court of Canada. The Campobello Island Year-Round Ferry Committee has begun preliminary discussions with local partners and regional law firms to pursue legal challenges, claiming that access to and from one's own country without undue search and forfeiture are protected in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

In the late 20th Century, crossing the international bridge to Lubec Maine was quite a simple matter – but 9-11 changed all that. Subsequent tightened US border security, the requirement for passports, and annoyances such as the opening of Campobello-bound mail by US authorities have made life very difficult for islanders.

Campobello resident Ulysse Robichaud, a member of the ferry committee, told the *Saint Croix Courier* that they were encouraged by a virtual meeting with Premier Higgs last May, but the enthusiasm appears to have evaporated. Although both the PC MLA and the Conservative MP for the area are supportive of a year-round ferry to the rest of New Brunswick, there does not appear to be any momentum in either Fredericton or Ottawa.

Committee chair Justin Tinker says the Province of New Brunswick and the Government of Canada continue to ignore calls and e-mails from island leadership, who asking for nothing more than what has already been afforded to other remote locations; access to their own country.

Now there's something you don't see every day – a former TTC streetcar arrives at its new home, on TAA member Alex Glista's family's farm in Priceville, ON.

Meet a Member
Alex Glista

TAA member Alex Glista is the proud owner of a retired Toronto CLRV streetcar.

Alex Glista graduated *in absentia* from Dalhousie University's Master of Planning program in May 2020. Two months earlier he had hastily packed his bags and returned home to Ontario due to uncertainty around travel restrictions and the unfolding pandemic –a major disappointment as his time spent in Nova Scotia had been cut short. Little did he know, but the unplanned return to Ontario opened a door to a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: the chance to save a retired Toronto Transit Commission Canadian Light Rail Vehicle (CLRV).

Alex decided to pursue a degree in urban and rural planning due to his love of transportation and infrastructure, specifically rail-based transportation. Originally from Oakville ON, he chose Dalhousie to experience east coast life.

First introduced in 1979, the CLRV was a Toronto-specific streetcar design to replace an aging PCC streetcar fleet. They served faithfully for 40 years, until replaced by the TTC's new Flexity Outlook vehicles. The last CLRV ran on December 29, 2019. Most of the 196 cars were scrapped, but in late June 2020 Alex accidently stumbled on a government auction website, where the TTC had listed 10 of these iconic streetcars for sale. The starting price was $3,400, and most of the vehicles didn't have any bids. After confirming that he could move the vehicle to his family's farm in Priceville ON, and figuring out logistics, he submitted a bid on CLRV #4187 with only 1 minute and 30 seconds left on the auction.

After winning, Alex had a "what did I just do?" moment. But with the enthusiastic and supportive help of his father Greg, he began preparing for the move to the farm. First, the pad where the CLRV would sit was readied, and ties and rail were acquired. Alex, his father, and a neighbour spent a hot summer day hammering in spikes and ensuring that the tracks conformed to the TTC's unique 4 ft 10 7⁄8 inch gauge. On July 30 #4187 made the trek to Priceville – riding on a specialty trailer.

"After the CN Tower, the CLRV streetcar is the most iconic image of Toronto," says Alex. "These streetcars were the workhorses of Toronto's downtown transit fleet for almost half a century, and I am thrilled that CLRV 4187 can retire here in Priceville."

Alex intends to restore and preserve CLRV 4187. Though he doesn't have enough track to run it, he plans a power connection so that the lights and rollsign can function once more. For the most part, he will leave the interior of the vehicle the same as it was while in service, but will make small modifications to make it a comfortable place for friends and family to hang out in.
He's often asked if he might turn it into an Airbnb. "Absolutely not! I do however hope to occasionally rent the vehicle out for photography events, such as for a unique engagement photo venue".

Honouring transit operators for their front-line service

A handful of the region's transit operators who TAA has collectively honoured with the 2020 John Pearce Award, for their service keeping transit moving through theis difficult last year. In the top row from left to right are Jacques Pelletier of Maritime Bus, Kyle Hansen of Greater Moncton's Codiac Transpo, and Fredericton Transit's Daniel Singer; in the centre are a group of Halifax Transit operators; below are Amy Bonnington driving for Metrobus Transit in St. John's, and T-3 Transit driver Ken Jones in Charlottetown.