# IDEAS IN MOTION

TRANSPORT ACTION ATLANTIC

## *A vision for renewed VIA Rail service in the Maritimes*

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

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

The tri-weekly operation eliminated the possibility of same-day returns to the Maritimes from Montreal, and one-day round trips to Moncton for residents of New Brunswick's North Shore – an important consideration for people who have few other public transportation options. The lack of frequency also rules out rail as a choice for weekend travel, and it limits its usefulness when severe winter conditions make other forms of transportation unreliable or impossible. In the years since, the train's schedule has been extended due to slow track conditions, train capacity has been constrained by the dwindling availability of serviceable equipment, and key on-board amenities have been lost due to the removal of infrastructure in Halifax that allowed VIA to turn its trains.

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

The 2024 federal budget allocated funding for VIA to begin the replacement of its long-distance, regional, and remote train fleet. This is an important step, but it needs to be seen through to completion in a timely fashion to ensure that VIA's services are not impacted before new equipment can arrive. It is also critical that the new fleet provide a sufficient increase in capacity to allow the trains to meet and grow market demand, and allow for the return of at least daily train service in Atlantic Canada. Further, investments are needed in the short-term to maintain the existing fleet. We continue to believe that frequency increases could be possible with the existing fleet, following refurbishment work.

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

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

Canada does not end at Quebec City! Canadians outside of the corridor also deserve investment in modern passenger rail equipment and services. At a time when national unity is of the utmost importance, investing in passenger rail is an ideal pathway to create economic opportunity and better connect Canadians from coast to coast to coast.

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