



TRANSPORT ACTION ATLANTIC

MEMBERS' UPDATE - FALL 2025



Physically integrated ticketing and waiting facilities for rail and motorcoach at Halifax station. Such integration is also provided in Moncton. If only the new VIA Rail booking system allowed through-ticketing from the Maritimes to Dorval, and if only the trains were reliable enough to make predictable connections to motorcoach services!

Autumnal Greetings!

We hope you have all enjoyed the fall colours and cooler nights! As we mentioned in our summer update, if you would be interested in becoming our Bulletin Editor, please let us know. This volunteer opportunity would involve compiling transportation news and opinions as well as photos into an attractive, readable format for both online and paper circulation. Content

could be provided by others as well as the editor, and of course it would be important to respect copyright for articles and pictures taken from elsewhere.

In the meantime, to help fill the void, here is our second periodic update on what we have been doing to advocate for better public transportation in our part of Canada. Much of this is already available online, but as before, we have pulled it together into a convenient format and can provide a printed version for those who prefer.

National Board Calls for Volunteers

As we noted last time, Marcus and Tim participate in online Transport Action Canada Board meetings. Our national President, Terry Johnson, will not be re-offering for this role for next fiscal year, after a long tenure in which he has revitalized the organization and provided helpful technical insights into rail transportation. We are also grateful to our former national President, Bruce Budd, who discovered Terry and recommended him for the position, and to David Jeanes, who has been doing double duty as both Treasurer and Membership Secretary at the national level.

To address the upcoming vacancy, the National Board is seeking suggestions for future National Board members and for potential candidates who could carry out some of the many responsibilities that Terry, David and others have been carrying. There are opportunities to get involved with membership management, social media, chairing meetings, organizing events and other activities from coast to coast to coast. Travel expenses are typically covered through vouchers generously provided by Via Rail, and Transport Action Canada can also assist with accommodation costs. If you are interested in becoming involved with the National Board, or if you know of someone who might be suitable, please let us know! (email marcusgarnet3@gmail.com)

The Ocean

Our President, Tim Hayman, met in October with Eve Danièle Veilleux and David Imbleau at VIA Rail's headquarters in Montreal. They discussed how to optimize service on The Ocean in the short term, before the new equipment becomes available. TAA continues to raise ideas for improvements, and advocate for service expansions sooner than the new fleet arrives.

Unfortunately, the federal government has allocated funds only for existing services, not for future expansions, so we will need to push for additional funding in future budgets to enable restoration of 6-day-per-week or daily service on the Ocean.

On October 7th, both Marcus and Tim attended a VIA Board reception at the Halifax station. There was a cordial and positive atmosphere, and some good news: contrary to earlier reports, the new equipment will include dome cars for the Ocean. Also, each new car type will be put into service soon after it has been built and tested, so some of the benefits will be felt earlier. The new cars will be compatible with existing cars so they can be introduced as part of the existing trains.



The VIA Rail Board reception at Halifax Station on October 7th, 2025 .

In New Brunswick, VIA sent a couple of Renaissance cars to the former IRSI plant in Moncton, which may suggest they are looking at major work on those as a stopgap before the new equipment is produced. This would be a change of emphasis, as VIA had previously focused on the stainless steel equipment for their interim fleet. Time will tell.

In one minor positive development, VIA made adjustments to the Ocean's days of operation for the upcoming holiday season, with trains that would have operated on Dec. 24 and Dec. 31 moved back a day to operate on Dec. 23 and Dec. 30 instead. This is a welcome change from the rigid approach of the last several years, which saw virtually empty trains running right on the holidays when few people wanted to travel, and missing out on potential revenues. It's still a far cry from the extra trains that used to be run over the holidays, but at least it is a modest attempt to provide a better service during this busy travel period.

Nova Scotia Budget and Transportation Study

The long-awaited Regional Transportation Plan from the NS Joint Regional Transportation Agency, now LINK Nova Scotia, has been released. You can read the whole plan here: https://linknovascotia.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/JRTA_Regional_Transportation_Plan_Full_Report_SINGLES_FINAL_20250805-web.pdf .

Of note, you can also see the Government's response here, which gives a bit of an idea of what they plan to do with this in the near term:

<https://linknovascotia.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/25-55544-143345-Government-Response-to-Link-Report.pdf>

We will see how this all plays out in the implementation, but at an initial read through it seems quite encouraging. The plan to develop an inter-municipal bus service, connecting with local transit systems (with a mention of fare integration in the report), is a particularly interesting one, especially with the idea that this would lay the groundwork for a future potential regional passenger rail network (similar to the notes about BRT, which may finally get a shot in the arm to move forward) as an initial groundwork toward light rail (LRT) corridors.



A remnant of Nova Scotia's former regional railway network. This is at Grand-Pre, where a couple of hundred metres of track remain alongside a multi-use trail. Not just commuters, but tourists could benefit from regional passenger trains. Historically, Grand-Pre had a station near this site on the former Dominion Atlantic Railway.

Of note on the passenger rail front, the government response envisages a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a Passenger Rail Feasibility Study, with initial emphasis on connections between Halifax and Bedford, Windsor and Halifax, and from Lantz. A Request for Expressions of Interest (REI) has already been issued. The REI is structured in an unusual way, with LINK NS retaining significant responsibility, e.g., for ridership estimates and coordination with host railroads. Of course, CN senior management would have to be brought onside, which is very difficult to imagine!

The Government of Nova Scotia is currently preparing its 2026 to 2027 budget. The provincial website (<https://novascotia.ca/budget-engagement/>) notes that the population has grown in recent years, and so has the demand for public services. However, global economic uncertainty is affecting Nova Scotia's economy. The provincial government must ensure it is spending mindfully on the programs and services most important to Nova Scotians, and is inviting feedback to help inform priorities for the upcoming budget. If you live in Nova Scotia, you can participate by emailing your feedback to budget@novascotia.ca , or by mailing your feedback to the Department of Finance and Treasury Board Budget Engagement, PO Box 187, Halifax, NS, B3J

2N3, or to your MLA (see <https://nslegislature.ca/members/profiles/contact>). The deadline for feedback is 12 December 2025.

Cape Breton Rail Transit Feasibility Study

The much anticipated CBRM Rail Transit feasibility study has been released. In short, the study found that establishing a rail transit system through downtown Sydney and through to Cape Breton University would be feasible, and could be up and running within 3 years at an approximate \$142.9 million capital cost.

The executive summary of the report states that *“The resulting analysis demonstrates that an ecofriendly renewable-powered light rail transit (LRT) system or a Go-Train system for a major passenger corridor in the CBRM is both realistic and ‘capital’ cost-effective for enhancing and expanding transit options in the region.”* It concludes that *“given these findings, it is proposed that Phase One of the CBRM LRT development begin immediately”*.

A key component of this study is highlighting the opportunity presented by the existing, dormant rail lines in the region, which would allow for minimal capital costs to set up such a system. Now the real question will be whether the provincial and federal governments will support moving ahead with funding this project.

You can read the full study here: <https://www.cbu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/CBRM-Rail-Transit-Feasibility-NOV2025.pdf>

Ferries

We were pleased to see the federal government followed through earlier this year on reducing ferry fares substantially for passengers on the Newfoundland ferries, as well as on other federally funded ferry services (e.g. NS-PEI, Digby-Saint John) in the region. While this is welcome, the one shortfall is the lack of any reduction for freight rates on the Newfoundland ferries, something that we will continue to campaign for as a critical component of reducing the cost of living. Following a recent election, Newfoundland has a Progressive

Conservative government which has promised better healthcare, lower taxes and safer communities. We must remind them that healthcare requires access for non-drivers, and that safe communities must include alternatives to hitchhiking!

Fares and Taxation

Our Atlantic President, Tim Hayman, recently responded to a media inquiry about train fare levels in Canada. A promising suggestion would be to remove HST or GST from inter-regional train and motorcoach services. Terry Johnson, our National President, has written an article on the Transport Action Canada website, about the HST discrepancy for inter-regional transit versus urban transit. Airlines do charge HST, so we can expect them to oppose any relief for inter-regional ground transportation.

VIA Rail in the Federal Budget

Our regional President, Tim Hayman, has had a look through the recent federal budget document and has written a quick summary of what is relevant to VIA (and some notes about Alto, the High Speed Rail project between Quebec City and Toronto). His main points are provided below.

On Page 124 of Chapter 1, there is a line item for "improving VIA Rail service in the corridor", which is classified as a capital investment of \$1 million in 2025-26, and \$2 million in each of the years from 2026-27 through 2029-30 (\$8 million total). The explanation below mentions "Funding proposed for VIA Rail Canada to implement technologies to improve on-time performance on its corridor services". We hope this includes enhanced grade crossing technology so Via is not forced to choose between excessively long trains or frequent speed restrictions between Quebec City and Windsor!

On Page 134 of Chapter 2, there is a section about a proposed "Buy Canadian Policy", which expects to set clear requirements for Canadian construction and/or Canadian content in procurements. This section states that "This new approach will extend to all federal agencies and Crown corporations, like VIA

Rail and Alto, which is responsible for the new High-Speed Rail initiative, leveraging every public dollar to strengthen Canada's economy, create jobs, and building capacity at home." It seems fair to assume that they would like the upcoming VIA long distance locomotive and passenger car procurements to be subject to these requirements, though we do not know how that connects with the early stages of the procurement launched prior to this new policy.

Pages 172 and 173 of Chapter 3 mention the renewal of the Canada Strong pass, and notes: "The pass boosted VIA Rail ridership by 6.5 per cent, visits to Parks Canada places increased by 10 per cent, and visitors at our museums were up around 15 per cent on average. As announced on October 10, Budget 2025 proposes to provide \$116.3 million over two years, starting in 2025-26, to renew the Canada Strong Pass for the holiday season, from December 12, 2025 to January 15, 2026, and then again for summer 2026."

Down on page 327 in the Comprehensive Expenditure Review, there is a table in the Transport Canada section listing the budget reductions that VIA Rail has identified for the next five years. As you may recall, all federal departments and Crown corporations had been directed to identify potential expenditure reductions. This is a look at what VIA has identified, but we may need to wait until their next quarterly or annual reports (or corporate plan) to see exactly where they have identified these savings to come from.

FY 2026-27 / 27-28 / 28-29 / 29-30 / Ongoing

VIA Rail 6.5 / 8.2 / 11.6 / 11.6 / 11.6

millions of dollars

It appears that their plan is to have an annual budget by 2028-29 that is \$11.6 million lower than at present, working gradually toward that over the next two years.

Meanwhile in Quebec...

As we noted last time, Quebec has its own, independent advocacy group for public transportation known as [Trajectoire Québec](#) which focuses on Montreal transit issues. Transport Action's National Board receives updates on wider Quebec issues from Harry Gow who resides in that province. Many Quebec issues are of interest to Atlantic Canada.

As we noted last time, VIA's Gaspé service has been suspended for many years due to deteriorated track, but federal and provincial funding has enabled the western end to be refurbished. Provincial funding has been withdrawn for the eastern end, so it is uncertain whether passenger rail will ever be restored to the town of Gaspé.

Gaspésians are demonstrating at stations, writing to politicians and informing the media about the need for passenger service at least for the two sections completely rehabbed, as far as Gascons/Port-Daniel (and the immense McInnis cement factory). The push is on to get the passenger train despite VIA repeating that it will happen only when the entire line to Gaspé is complete. See: www.gaspetrain.org

Montreal's new REM "skytrain" plans to open its next extension in mid-November. This involves the transformation of the railway between Central Station and Deux-Montagnes from commuter train service to frequent, grade separated light rail. This includes conversion of the Mount Royal Tunnel from conventional rail. Unfortunately, this prevents use of the tunnel by any future high speed rail service, so Alto will need to find an alternative route if it wishes to serve downtown Montreal.

Is there any hope that Montreal will get a downtown station for the planned Alto High Speed Rail (HSR) service? That is a question that Marcus asked online during the Alto HSR information session on October 7th. In their reply, Alto felt it is too early to say. There will be round tables held at each of the seven cities to be served, and the alternative corridors presented for the entire route will be very wide and generalized.

Compiled by Marcus Garnet, Vice President, and Tim Hayman, President, with thanks to Harry Gow and David Jeanes.