



TRANSPORT ACTION ATLANTIC

MEMBERS' UPDATE - WINTER 2026

Yes, we know winter is over!

You may be wondering why we send out a winter newsletter after winter is over! Well, this is meant to look back on each season to give our members a sense of what we have been doing in response to various issues that have come up. So, it is more like an update than a cutting-edge source of news. We are still looking for anyone interested in resuming the Transport Action Atlantic Bulletin or some other newsletter for us, and if you would like to take that on, please contact Marcus Garnet at marcusgarnet3@gmail.com or call him at 902-580-0508. In the meantime, we hope these seasonal updates are helpful, and we wish you the best as we come into a long-awaited springtime!

Irresponsibly Parked Trucks Derailed VIA Rail's *Ocean*



VIA 14 rests off the tracks after striking trucks at Saint-Alexandre-de-Kamouraska QC, January 12, 2026 (Photo – From Northumberland Free Press)

In the early morning of January 12, 2026, the eastbound *Ocean* derailed after striking trucks on the track at Saint-Alexandre-de-Kamouraska QC. Thankfully, there were no serious injuries to passengers or crew. The derailment took considerable time to clear, and four HEP (head-end powered stainless steel cars - a baggage car and three Chateau sleeping cars) derailed, while other cars suffered damage from frozen pipes after they were sidelined without electrical hookup.

In the aftermath, VIA cancelled the next departures of the *Ocean*, then cancelled alternating trains while running with only one train set for two weeks following the incident.

TAA reached out to VIA with the following questions:

- 1) What is VIA doing to prioritize the speedy return of full service for the Ocean?
- 2) As this is the off-season, there is a considerable amount of equipment from the Canadian and other routes sitting idle. This should be more than enough to equip a full set of HEP equipment to operate on the Ocean. While this would not be the usual equipment, it would provide an alternative to outright cancellations. Is there some reason that this is not possible, and is VIA even evaluating this option?
- 3) What is VIA doing to restore the condition of the existing equipment fleet to ensure that these sorts of cancellations are not required in the future after any unforeseen issues? To what extent has this derailment affected the plans for equipment refurbishment?

Full service resumed by January 30 with a second trainset assembled from spare equipment.

Via Equipment Shortage

Adding to the capacity problems arising from the derailment, from February 11 through March 18 VIA removed all Renaissance sleeping cars from both of the *Ocean* trainsets for planned maintenance. Due to the reduced sleeper capacity, preference was given to existing bookings, so new bookings in all classes and for all destinations were temporarily blocked. Solo travelers who had booked a Renaissance double cabin were switched to HEP roomettes with a partial refund.

Even more concerning, VIA took the extraordinary step of temporarily blocking all reservations on the entire route of the *Ocean* through the middle of March, including in economy class. As a specific example, Train #15 departed Halifax on February 15 with the full trainset that had not yet been shortened – so it still had all of its usual sleeping cars and economy class cars. But bookings were inhibited right up to departure, including for every segment on the route. So, if a prospective passenger that day wanted to travel from Halifax to Truro, or Moncton to Miramichi, even that was not allowed. As of the afternoon of February 17, half of the trains through Feb/March were re-opened for booking, as it appears VIA continued to make changes to the consist plans. The rest, using the already shortened trainset, remained blocked.

Ocean Train no longer prioritizes scenic views

The orientation of the *Ocean* trainsets has again been reversed, putting the Renaissance equipment back on the east end of the train. This undoes a passenger-experience oriented change that was made in early 2024 under the direction of former VIA CEO Mario Peloquin, which put the sleeper bedrooms on the more scenic side of the train. We have been told this was done for operational convenience, but passenger experience should also be important.

Passenger experience has also deteriorated since external window washing in Halifax was discontinued. This is especially noticeable on the HEP cars, which are wider and more exposed to dirt (see the photo on the next page). The loss of the dome car due to the Port of Halifax removing the turnaround track in Halifax means there are fewer alternative vantage points for passengers frustrated by dirty windows. If VIA cannot afford to hire window cleaners, might there be an opportunity to draw from volunteer labour through some kind of community partnership?



Streaks of dirt outside a roomette window on the Ocean. How can we show off Maritime scenery when it is obscured by filthy windows and without a dome car? (photo by Marcus Garnet)

We remain optimistic about VIA's new long distance fleet, which will eventually remedy these deficiencies; but we are increasingly concerned about what our passenger rail service will look like for the better part of the next decade before those new trains come into service. The Ocean was once a world-class train, and although the onboard staff still offer attentive service, we need a concrete plan to ensure that existing equipment is both reliable and attractive in the meantime. And, if NASA can send people around the moon and back, can VIA find some way to put a mid-train dome car on the *Ocean*?

VIA to Refurbish Sleeping Cars

In news that offers some hope on the equipment front, on April 2 VIA Rail announced the award of a contract to CAD Railway Industries in Lachine to undertake a “major modernization program” for its entire fleet of Château and Manor sleeper cars over the next 5 years. VIA has heralded this project, a \$150 million investment, as “part of its ongoing commitment to improving the passenger experience and strengthening Canada’s passenger rail system”. Though the full scope of this refurbishment was not noted in the press release, we understand it will involve a modernization of various electrical and mechanical systems, as well as a full overhaul of the interior fittings.

This refurbishment is particularly badly needed for the Chateau sleepers, which have not had any major overhaul work since the late 1990s. With a number of Chateau cars sitting idle in recent years, this work may also free up more cars for use, though it will likely be a year or two before the first of the refurbished cars are ready for service. This program will ensure that the existing fleet is able to continue in service until the new long distance fleet is ordered and delivered, which will take much of the next decade to complete. It’s not clear if any major work will be done on the remnants of the Renaissance fleet.

Nova Scotia Downplays Passenger Rail Potential

An informed source reports that the Province of Nova Scotia has asked its strategic transportation planning agency, now known as LINK Nova Scotia, to tone down its enthusiasm for rail. Apparently, the only passenger rail service now being studied is between Windsor and the planned Bedford fast ferry at Mill Cove, which appears unlikely to be realistic as much of the track is decrepit. The provincial government has already shown a strong bias toward road building in recent projects.

Meanwhile in Cape Breton, the recently studied light rail concept is seen as potentially interfering with traffic on a major road. Although a grade crossing should be technically feasible, there seems to be a mindset that road traffic must take priority over moving people by transit. So, if Cape Breton light rail is ever to be realized, it would have to be politically driven.

Halifax – Bedford Fast Ferry Costs

HRM's Bedford fast ferry capital cost has doubled since it was embraced by Halifax Regional Council, and implementation has been set back one year due to municipal budget constraints. The existing downtown ferry terminal will have to be demolished to enable a new, larger terminal to be built, which will disrupt existing ferry access. A recent Council decision favoured continuing with the project in spite of these challenges.

In the meantime, HRM has started planning consultations for development around the planned Mill Cove fast ferry terminal in Bedford. Marcus has filled out an online survey, noting that the railway is an asset, not just a barrier, and suggesting that provision be made for a future station enabling intermodal connections.

Halifax Ride-hailing expands

Lyft has added Halifax to the cities it serves. Uber already serves Halifax. There have been suggestions that such ride-hail networks should meet standards comparable to taxi companies. Informal conversations with taxi drivers suggest that ride-hailing apps have been drawing passengers from traditional cabs. Ride hailing has a complex relationship with public transit: it is known to draw some passengers away, yet it can also enable urban households to avoid car ownership, which may widen the overall transit market.

Will Halifax compromise bus lanes, reduce rural service and raise fares?

Halifax Regional Council has requested a report considering whether to allow high-occupancy vehicles (HOVs), including cars with more than one occupant, in designated bus lanes. We are concerned that this could undermine the future potential for bus rapid transit, which has not yet received funding.

Halifax Transit has presented its next three-year plan, which could lead to rural service cuts in exchange for higher frequencies on urban/suburban corridors. There is also a proposal to provide 24-hour service for the airport. Proposals for service through the community of Fall River, instead of only to the isolated park-and-ride terminal, have been rejected as this would add ten minutes to schedules. Transit fares may also be raised substantially, an ironic twist as tolls have been discontinued on the two harbour bridges and ferry fares may also rise.

Moncton 8-Year Transit Plan

In Moncton, Codiac Transit has compiled an 8-year plan which will include new spending to increase frequencies and coverage. Improvements will begin to take effect in 2027. Routes will be classified as Frequent, Local, and Targeted. Transit signal priority will also be introduced, as well as more shelters and other improvements. (CBC)

New Brunswick Rural Paratransit

Several rural New Brunswick communities, including Bathurst, will benefit from new \$5 door-to-door transit services called FlexGo, under the Chaleur Regional Service Commission. Edmundston already has such a service. Campbellton and Grand Falls are planned for later this year. The ultimate goal is to link multiple northern New Brunswick rural communities with larger employment and service centres.

Meanwhile in Quebec...

Maritimers will find it easier to reach Montreal's West Island after arriving at Central Station since the re-opening of the Mount Royal Tunnel as part of the new REM rapid transit system. Two new underground stations within the tunnel serve McGill and l'Universite de Montreal. The downside is that conventional trains can no longer use the tunnel, so there is a transfer station for connecting to the Mascouche commuter train.



View from the front of the REM train about to enter the Mount Royal Tunnel heading for Central Station. Self-driving trains offer an unobstructed view of the line ahead. The tunnel also includes two new stations, each with convenient Metro connections. (photo by Marcus Garnet)

Marcus recently sampled the extended route out to Deux-Montagnes, and was impressed with the smoothness of the ride and the brisk acceleration by the self-driving trains. The seating, however, leaves much to be desired – hard, cold plastic longitudinal seats so one cannot sit next to a window. Fortunately, the windows are very large and clean. The station platforms are all enclosed with climate control and doors synchronized to open when the train doors open. Trains are so frequent that published schedules are not needed, and the service feels more like the metro than light rail. All in all, the new service is very impressive. Branches to l’Anse-a-l’Orme (near Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue) and Trudeau International Airport at Dorval are also planned and nearing completion.

Volunteer opportunities

If you would like to write an article or take a photo for us to publish, please contact us at christinemillsgarnet@gmail.com or Transport Action Atlantic, P.O. Box 268, Dartmouth NS B2Y 3Y3.

If you would be interested in becoming our 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 any articles and pictures taken from elsewhere.

Beyond that specific role, we are always looking for interested volunteers to help drive our advocacy forward. There is a lot that we would like to do, and clearly a role for an organization like ours to play - there is much to advocate for in Atlantic Canada's intercity public transportation landscape! - but it is always a challenge without dedicated, passionate people who have both the drive and, importantly, the time to devote to this work. If you would like to be more involved or have ideas for how we could improve what we are doing, please reach out.

John Pearce Award - Call for nominations

Several years ago, TAA inaugurated the John Pearce Award to commemorate the association's long-time former and founding president, who devoted more than 40 years to advocating for public transportation. It is awarded annually to an individual or group to recognize an outstanding contribution, consistent with Mr. Pearce's life-long passion.

We are seeking nominations for the next John Pearce Award recipient, and we would love to hear from you. Is there someone, either an individual, group, or organization, that you feel has made an outstanding contribution to improving the state of public transportation in Atlantic Canada? If you would like to make a nomination, please contact us at atlantic@transportaction.ca

Compiled by Marcus Garnet and Tim Hayman