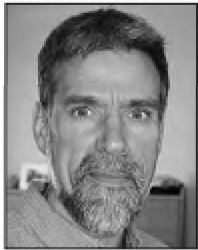


Editorial page



Commentary

Gilles Gagné

Food for thought: How about a real national transportation policy?

The next federal election will be held on October 21, 2019. Even though the election is still over ten months away, we can already tell that many parties are in election mode. This is a prime example of the advantages and the inconveniences of fixed election dates. There is some predictability time-wise but it makes for a very long pre-campaign.

There is, however, some positive in a long pre-election campaign. It gives political think tanks time to think about the many subjects requiring reflection.

Considering the declining state of long distance transportation in most of Canada's rural areas, with some effort political parties could propose an ambitious plan. The situation is ridiculous for a country that is one of the richest in the world, on a per capita basis.

The reality is that most of Canada's rural communities are experiencing a decline in their transportation capacity. Truth be told, transportation, especially the train, bus and sometimes air services, were way more efficient, reliable and present 60 years ago! The deterioration of our wharves adds to the handicap experienced by a number of Canadian regions.

There is really nothing funny about it. A look at the land transportation picture speaks volumes about the severity of the Canada-wide problem.

Since January 1990, VIA Rail's passenger service has been reduced to a fraction of what it should be in a modern country. The Gaspé Peninsula was a prime victim of those service cuts when its daily train was reduced to a three-times a week service, as if it is convenient for people to travel three days out of seven. Since September 2013, that service has been suspended because of the state of the railway, mostly its bridges.

The Maritimes have only been served three times a week instead of six times since October 2012, another silly decision by federal government-owned VIA Rail. That public transporter states that the ridership doesn't justify six trains a week, but everybody with a bit of knowledge of long distance travel knows that a daily service, daily in the sense of seven days a week, with shorter trains and a quality of service comparable to the Quebec City-Windsor corridor's would lead to a passenger increase.

Canada's Western provinces, including British Columbia are also experiencing major cuts in their bus services, as Greyhound Canada phased out almost all its services in October. The company blames those cuts on a 41% decline in ridership since 2010, persistent competition from subsidized national and inter-regional passenger transportation services, the growth of new low-cost airlines, regulatory constraints and the growth of car ownership.

If the company is right, then a government program has to be implemented. A lot of people will question putting public funds in what used to be a business but transportation is a matter of prime im-

portance. In many European countries, that matter is understood and efficient train and bus services fill the needs of the population. It is not even an issue there.

Environmentally-speaking, long-distance commuting also represents a way to reduce pollution, in a country that seems to be short on solutions in that area.

Again, the deterioration of transportation in rural areas is not normal in a developed country. It leaves social, economic and cultural needs unfilled and prevents numerous opportunities from happening.

Considering that some health and education services must be obtained outside rural areas, is it fair to say that the millions of Canadians living in those regions must keep an access to such services, given that they too are paying taxes? It is obviously fair.

Will a company plan to invest money in a community that is not served by adequate transportation needs? Most of the time, the company will back off.

Is it easier to organize a cultural event if you can't assure a swift way to move the artists and the visitors? It is not, for sure. Culture is an essential part of a quality life.

The country's politicians have been quick to point out that service cuts are justified by the demographics. That is pure nonsense in most cases. The Gaspé Peninsula is a good example of a region suffering from the "unjustified." Why would a region lose close to 100% of its train service and 65% of its bus service after losing 15% of its population in 25 years? How can you justify such service reductions in a region where tourism is booming?

The economy has diversified and rate of the population decline has greatly diminished. There is room for hope and an improvement of the situation requires decent long distance transportation. It is simple.

Transportation shortcomings prevent rural communities from fully contributing to the national economy and to society in general. It opens the door to analysts obsessed with urban issues concluding that rural areas don't do enough for the prosperity of the country. Well, give those areas the right tools and they will surprise you.

Politicians are not all leaders. This is an understatement. Most of them need to be pushed before showing sparks of inspiration and goodwill. Regarding the most important issue of rural transportation, the time has come to push our politicians, since they are lacking foresight on that issue.