



Major changes could hit the operations of the Ocean train if no solution is found to cope with the end of an agreement linking VIA Rail and the Port of Halifax.

Photo: G. Gagné

End of Halifax agreement raises doubts about VIA Rail's Ocean train

Gilles Gagné

MATAPEDIA: – When the agreement between VIA Rail and the Port of Halifax comes to an end in November, it could significantly change the way the public transporter operates its passenger train linking Montreal and Halifax. Some observers of the railway scene are even worried about the future of the train called the Ocean.

Since the suspension of VIA Rail services between Matapédia, New Carlisle and Gaspé in 2013, the Ocean train has been used widely by Gaspésians, thanks to its stops in Campbellton, New Brunswick and Matapédia.

The agreement between VIA Rail and Halterm, the Port of Halifax entity managing its two container terminals, ends on November 1. According to the current agreement, twice a week VIA Rail can turn its passenger train between its end-of-afternoon arrival and its departure the following day. Once a week it leaves two days later.

Halterm informed VIA Rail that after November 1, the space occupied by the turning loop, where the train is turned, will be needed for another use. That other use is currently unknown, as the Port of Halifax refuses to talk to the media.

“Halterm wants to regain that space when the agreement expires. We don't know if they want to use that space to stack containers or they need it to

maximize the loading of ships and their departure. We are still talking to the port authorities in order to renew the agreement, however, everybody involved in that issue at VIA Rail is looking for solutions,” explains Karl-Philip Marchand-Giguère, VIA Rail's spokesperson.

For now, he won't confirm that recently a VIA Rail Ocean train turned using a wye located in Truro, 64 miles away from downtown Halifax. The train apparently backed all the way up and all the way down. (A wye, a set of tracks designed like the letter Y, a common tool used to turn trains.)

Backing up over such distances takes time because the train cannot go at full speed and it is not optimal, safety-wise. It could be avoided if the two locomotives used on the Ocean train are placed back-to-back, a common arrangement on some passenger and freight trains. VIA Rail usually does not opt for that arrangement on the Ocean train.

A back-to-back arrangement of the two locomotives does not solve the way some of the passenger cars will be placed. The dome car would roll with the rear end first if it is not turned and the coach cars would also have the seats going backwards for the return trip.

Rail activities observer André Saint-Amand, who resides in Quebec but who lived in Halifax years ago, mentions that “once in Truro, they could turn the train there, and couple the locomotives to the Park car

(the dome or observation car) for the remaining route to Halifax. I am sure that the passengers would not mind that the train runs backwards just for 60 miles,” he mentions.

Shunting in Halifax would be required to put some cars, like the baggage car, in the right place.

Another rail advocate, Ted Bartlett, of Transport Action Atlantic, has little faith in pinch hit solutions if VIA Rail and the Port of Halifax are the only stakeholders involved in talks.

“They're looking for solutions, but they don't appear to have found one yet. So really what is required here is government intervention to make sure there is a favourable outcome, and that climate-friendly long-distance passenger trains are enabled to continue in and out of Halifax,” Mr. Bartlett told CTV.

There is a former wye located 15.7 miles from the VIA Rail station in Halifax, at Windsor Junction. The wye is dismantled but the property remains vacant there. The place was the junction between the CN main line connecting Halifax to Moncton and the CP Rail line linking that part of Halifax and the Annapolis Valley. That line is no longer active and part of it was torn up.

Karl-Philip Marchand Giguère, of VIA Rail, was not aware of the existence of that former wye when SPEC reached him but he committed to checking if a wye could be reinstalled at Windsor Junction.