

## Editorial page

### Gilles Gagné Commentary



### VIA Rail and Transport Canada unfit to find solutions

Over the last few weeks, Via Rail Canada has made several announcements pertaining to its services. The number of trains is increasing in the Quebec City-Windsor corridor, the Canadian train is now back rolling on its original Toronto-Vancouver route, instead of the shorter Winnipeg-Vancouver circuit, and the federal government brass announced on July 6 a plan to implement a high-frequency train, this time in the shorter Quebec City-Toronto corridor.

On July 9, just as the SPEC was reaching its deadline, Via Rail announced the August partial return of the Ocean train, between Montreal and Halifax. Partial means once a week instead of three.

If people had doubts about an early fall election, those doubts must be erased by now. The high frequency train press conference was the epitome of a pre-electoral announcement.

Transport Minister Omar Alghabra, Innovation, Science and Industry Minister François-Philippe Champagne and Treasury Board Minister Jean-Yves Duclos were all on hand for the announcement.

It took place in Quebec City, a territory dominated by the Conservative Party. The Liberal Party has to make gains in Quebec's capital area in order to win a country-wide majority in the upcoming election.

The second same day train press conference was held in Trois-Rivières. That city's immediate area has not voted for the Liberal Party since... 1984. Justin Trudeau sure wants to make gains there as well. In fact, the Liberal Party war room, where the main organizers plan the next electoral race, know that they need to make serious progress in Quebec if they are to get a majority in the fall. Quebecers are known to be volatile voters at the federal level.

Truth be told, recent announcements by Via Rail are troubling in many ways, and make transport observers wonder if the current federal government is taking people for fools.

Consider the following elements. Until July 9, Via Rail basically ignored the needs of 2.2 million loyal users, the clientele living east of Quebec City. That is more precisely the population living east of Lévis, called the Appalachians region, the Lower Saint Lawrence, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. We could add to it part of Prince Edward Island because some Islanders take the train out of Moncton and Sackville.

Since February 10, 2020, Via Rail has operated less than a handful of trains between Montreal and Halifax, so in slightly more than 17 months. The public transporter stopped operating the Ocean train shortly after the erection of the blockades in support of the Wet'suwet'en First Nation in British Columbia. Once all the blockades lifted on March 5, the Ocean train was reinstated, only to be suspended again a week later because of the coronavirus situation. The Montreal-Halifax train has not rolled since.

Until June of this year, the New Brunswick and Nova Scotia governments applied very strict sanitary measures to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Travelling from Quebec to the Maritimes was tedious if not impossible.

However, it is now possible to travel to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.

On May 6, as the COVID situation was improving in the country, Via Rail issued a press release stating that the Ocean train will not resume service until at least November 1st! The electoral context likely changed that on July 9.

It must also be mentioned that in Quebec nothing was preventing Via Rail from restoring the service between Montreal and Matapedia or New Richmond. The rolling material was underutilized nation-wide and it would have been a good way to provide some service back to a cross-section of its clientele, Gaspésians, who have been neglected for years, and often ill served for decades now, considering the effects of cuts that go back 40 years.

Whether the requests came from groups like the Coalition of Gaspésians for the return of the train or from the press, Via Rail has provided quite incomplete answers most of the times or flatly ignored those requests, as it was recently the case with SPEC. The July 9 announcement regarding the partial return of the Ocean train is a paltry compensation.

That behaviour comes from a public corporation, funded by taxpayers money. How should we interpret that longtime overlooking attitude towards the needs of Eastern Quebec and Eastern Canada?

Via Rail's management sure favour the Quebec City corridor as about 60% of the country's population is concentrated there, however, neglecting the rest of Canada is unfair.

If 90% of Via Rail's ridership comes from the Quebec City-Windsor corridor, it is notably because that territory contains the highest concentration of Canada's population but also because the transporter operates more than 90% of its trains there.

Via Rail's management has often stated that the Eastern Canada clientele only contributes a tiny part of the overall ridership. There is no surprise there. Who considers that we are well-served when we only get three weekly round trips between Montreal and Halifax, a train that only touches the Gaspé Peninsula in Matapedia since the service was suspended in September 2013 in New Carlisle and since December 2011 in Port Daniel, Chandler, Grand River, Percé, Barachois and Gaspé? For an undetermined period, the clientele east of Quebec City will only have one weekly train.

Even with a train only coming three times a week, the Montreal-Halifax and Montreal-Gaspé trains were carrying regularly 250,000 people annually ten years ago. What would it be if we could get a daily train? Our performance, population-wise, would be as good and maybe better than that of the Quebec City-Windsor corridor.

There is another reason leading most train transport observers to believe that the Canadian government and Via Rail are taking the majority of the country's population for fools when passenger train services are at stake.

The high frequency train's delivery schedule is not determined yet. Year 2030 is often mentioned but never confirmed by the authorities. If the high frequency train is effectively rolling nine years down the road and according to the parameters that were presented on July

6, it will cover the distance mentioned in the schedules in about the same time as at the end of 1970!

Canadian National's Rapido trains in 1971 and in 1976 covered the distance between Quebec City and Montreal in two hours and 59 minutes, sometimes less, despite being pulled by locomotives limited to 145 kilometres per hour, or 90 miles per hour. By 1997, Via Rail had been able to reduce that time to two hours and 45 minutes. It is more or less the time targeted by that transporter over that stretch nine years down the road!

What is the use of building \$12 billion worth of dedicated corridors for electrified train lines between Quebec City and Toronto (the Toronto-Windsor stretch seems to be forgotten by Via Rail as well) if you are not cutting sizeable travel time?

The federal government opted for a high frequency train instead of a high-speed train. The latter's speed must surpass the 250 kilometre per hour. That decision is heavily criticized and lacked ambitions, point out most transport experts. They are probably right.

The greatest shortcoming though derives from the lack of an important time gain for the customers. It would have been possible to use trains rolling at 230 or 240 kilometres per hour, still far from France's 350-plus kilometre per hour high speed trains, but ensuring that the Montreal-Quebec City trip takes less than two hours. That would have convinced an important portion of car users indifferent to environmental matters to make the switch. In the context of the July 6 announcement, that will not happen.

To illustrate the striking inefficiency of that announcement, it might be useful to stress that in 2003 in Finland, some passenger trains were circulating at 260 kilometres per hour on tracks shared with freight trains. There is a 27-year difference between 2003 and 2030 and Canada will still be far from Finland's efficiency then.

The high frequency train choice can still be modified. If the high-speed train is waived, can we at least settle for an efficiency gain for the riders?

Moreover, the \$10-12 billion tab attached to the high frequency train must leave room to capital investment in Eastern Canada trains and other regions of Canada. Other countries, even the ones characterized by a scattered population, have shown that efficient train services reaching out to rural regions favour equitable development, socially and economically