

“Right of way and passenger bill of rights for VIA Rail would be a great idea,” says Cynthia Patterson

The two measures could reduce passenger train delays

GILLES GAGNÉ

NEW RICHMOND – Cynthia Patterson, who has been advocating for better train services for close to 40 years in the Gaspé Peninsula and elsewhere, enthusiastically supports VIA Rail president Mario Pélouin’s recent proposal. Mr. Pélouin’s vision, as outlined in a mid-October interview with the Canadian Press, involves urging the federal government to prioritize passenger trains over freight in Canada.

The priority measure, which would ideally be complemented by a passenger bill of rights, aims to hold the major railroads owners CN and CP accountable when passenger trains face delays due to freight traffic.

“Accountable” meaning inconvenienced passengers would be compensated, typically in the form of discounts on future trips by CN and CP. It’s worth noting that VIA Rail owns only 3% of the network used by its trains.



On October 16, VIA Rail’s Ocean train was nearly four-and-a-half hours late, a delay not uncommon in 2023.

lays for passengers.”

The current system multiplies delays because CN Rail and CP Rail have the final say when VIA Rail’s passenger trains encounter their freight counterparts. The majority of VIA Rail trains operate on CN lines.

Prioritizing passenger trains

speed to the levels of the 1980s and earlier, she adds.

Furthermore, no individual contacted by the SPEC since June experienced “on time” arrivals in Montreal, Halifax, Campbellton, or Matapedia after travelling on VIA Rail’s Ocean train. For instance, on October 2, the train was six hours behind schedule, reaching Campbellton in the afternoon instead of the early morning. On October 16, the train arrived in Montreal four hours and 25 minutes late, a rather frequent occurrence as reported by passengers.

On October 18, SPEC reached out to VIA Rail, requesting a record of punctuality between Montreal and Halifax for the past five months. Unfortunately, no response was received. Despite a follow-up inquiry on November 9, SPEC was still awaiting a reply as it approached its deadline.

CN’s line privatization was a mistake

Cynthia Patterson asserts that CN’s privatization in 1995 was a mistake, especially getting rid of the railroad network.

“CN’s lines shouldn’t have been privatized. Selling the tracks was like shooting themselves in the foot,” she declares. This criticism extends to government officials who opted to not only sell equipment like locomotives and cars but also the entire network, which could have been retained for more convenient use by other railway companies.

“It would have been a fine way to give VIA Rail a prior-

ity,” emphasizes Ms. Patterson.

The privatization of CN was initiated on paper by the Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney at the start of 1992 and materialized in November 1995, two years after the election of Liberal Party’s Jean Chrétien in October 1993.

Rail industry shippers express opposition

The Canadian Press interviewed John Corey, President of the Freight Management Association of Canada (FMA). He expressed concerns that granting VIA right of way over the country’s two main rail operators, Canadian National Railway and Canadian Pacific, would further pressure an already strained supply chain, as would a rights charter holding them accountable for delays.

“Prioritizing passenger rail service over freight rail service would be the tail wagging the dog. Freight railways, their customers, and Canadians, in general, would be subsidizing the few people using the passenger rail system,” pointed out Mr. Corey.

He further noted, “Currently, freight rail service in Canada is not optimal from a shipper’s point of view. Any initiative that would make freight rail service less efficient would not be supported by the FMA.”

John Corey added that he can sympathize with travellers.

“I have taken VIA and sat on a siding waiting for the freight train to pass.”

In response to the Freight

Management Association of Canada’s spokesperson, Cynthia Patterson promptly reacts. “I don’t buy the argument that we need to give priority to freight shippers to solve the supply chain problem. Railways are parallel to highways. Freight is heavily subsidized because of the country’s highways.”

Ms. Patterson also points out that CN has removed numerous sidings over the years, complicating meetings between passenger and freight trains, and adding delays to VIA Rail. Railway freight carriers triggered the problem that could come later for them if an eventual priority be conferred to VIA Rail, along with a bill of rights for passengers.

“CN has it both ways: priority and reduced sidings. We cannot turn back the clock, but to have sold the tracks was an appalling move. Passenger rail, with no control over its rails! Imagine selling city streets and provincial highways for the primary use of commercial trucks and expecting public buses to perform with “on time” efficiency,” she summarizes.

The Gaspé Peninsula model, with a railway owned by Quebec’s Ministry of Transport and freight trains managed by a municipal entity such as the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, might offer different possibilities, particularly between Matapedia and Gaspé, according to Cynthia Patterson.

“This brings me back to the advantage we now have, wrung out of a sorry set of government abandonments: a provincially owned and municipally administered and maintained track. We have the opportunity to do things differently here,” emphasizes Cynthia Patterson.

Due to intensive track and bridge improvements, the Matapedia-to-Gaspé line is currently open between Matapedia and New Richmond. By the end of 2024, the New Richmond to Port Daniel stretch will be put back in service, while the Port Daniel to Gaspé section is slated for traffic resumption by the end of 2026.

The Canadian Press also quoted Marc Brazeau, Chief Executive Officer of the Railway Association of Canada,

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Photos: G. Gagné

Cynthia Patterson asserts that prioritizing VIA Rail over freight trains would significantly reduce delays.

Expressing her satisfaction with the proactive stance taken by VIA Rail’s president, Cynthia Patterson, a resident of Barachois, remarks, “I am glad to see some action coming from a VIA Rail president. That pleases me. I don’t understand why we give priority to freight trains in Canada. That’s where the money is, probably (companies hauling freight). In this case, VIA Rail’s past presidents have been stumbling around these important issues. We have a system that is producing de-

would significantly enhance overall performance. VIA Rail’s Mario Pélouin admitted in October that 60% of the public transporter’s trains faced delays during the summer.

Cynthia Patterson highlights that VIA Rail punctuality between Halifax and Montreal was worse, primarily due to maintenance work conducted by CN in Northern New Brunswick and the Matapedia Valley. She notes, however, that CN is not undertaking improvements to elevate its train

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which represents CN and CP, as saying that any legislation that alters right of way on the rails would need to be balanced against the importance of efficient freight operations.

“While millions of Canadians rely on passenger rail to connect communities and to get them to work, school, or family visits on time (or even to doctors’ appointments and to deliver their groceries in remote communities), any passenger service proposal must demonstrate that freight capacity to handle current and future anticipated volumes can be preserved, which is essential to support Canada’s economy,” Mr.

Brazeau said in an email.

The office of Transport Canada Minister, Pablo Rodriguez, did not respond to Canadian Press’ questions regarding whether it continues to consider passenger train priority or a bill of rights for riders.

“I would have expected a stronger interest from the minister’s office. It is also a sign that Transport Canada and the Federal Ministry of the Environment are not working together on the greenhouse effect gas file. Passenger trains could cut those emissions. We are essentially left with the option of private cars in our region,” she deplors.

In the United States, public transporter Amtrak enjoys priority over freight trains.