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THE NORTH MAIN LINE REBORN



An Action Plan for VIA's North Main Line

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For

Save VIA of St. Marys, Ontario

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Cover photo by Dan Hammond

Executive Summary

VIA's North Main Line (NML) is performing at far less than its potential. Declines in ridership, revenue and service frequency have been occurring for several years. There is no sign of this downturn ending and no evidence of a credible and verified VIA plan that can halt it.

The NML and VIA's other nationwide services suffer from a series of systemic flaws that include:

- No enabling legislation to establish VIA's mandate, rights and obligations;
- No Parliamentary oversight or input into any aspects of VIA's continued functioning;
- Inadequate funding and no budgetary assurances, making both short- and long-range planning difficult;
- Politicized board and management lacking real-world railway experience;
- Over-priced and inadequate train service agreements with the freight railways, which lack passenger priority provisions;
- Managerial fear of freight railway retaliation if VIA employs Section 152 of the *Canada Transportation Act* to assure adequate service and costing;
- The oldest main line fleet in the industrialized world; and
- Crumbling infrastructure on some of the freight short line railways on which VIA is dependent for track access.

On the NML, there are many specific problems that can be addressed quickly and at low cost. The problem now is that VIA is focused on other projects that show little prospect of healing its systemic ills, such as a plan to have the private sector build a 110-mph Montreal-Ottawa-Toronto passenger line for VIA's use. As well, a recent VIA plan for the NML and all of Southwestern Ontario remains highly questionable and potentially undeliverable.

However, numerous low-cost improvements can be implemented on the NML to boost ridership, revenue, cost recovery and service frequency. Among these are:

- Short-term leasing of a limited number of cars to expand capacity and enable push-pull operation, which will have a large impact on VIA's costs, operations and service delivery;
- Enhanced market development efforts in conjunction with the varied attractions and tourism, leisure and cultural activity operators all along the NML; and
- Operational improvements to increase the speed, decrease the running times and provide more frequencies on the NML.

The options recommended in this plan are doable within one year. With an election occurring on October 19, the decision rests with the next federal government. It will have to deal with VIA in a more positive and innovative manner than has been the case since VIA was improperly and inadequately launched in 1977.

1.0 Background

It's blandly identified as VIA's North Main Line (NML). With the deterioration in the service now provided on this once-busy passenger route, it might be more aptly labelled the North Branch Line. But it doesn't have to be this way.

The passenger service on the Toronto-St. Marys-London line thrived under Canadian National Railways (CN) and early VIA operation. With the succession of evenly-spaced and economically vibrant communities along its length, the NML was often referred to by railroaders as prime passenger territory because it more closely resembled a multi-stop interurban streetcar line than an intercity service. The trains were important, integral parts of all these communities.

At its peak in the early VIA years, the NML had four Toronto-London roundtrips daily, plus a Stratford-Toronto train on a morning-in, evening-return schedule. All were assigned self-propelled Budd rail diesel cars (RDCs) as part of what amounted to a stand-alone operation of the NML service. The trains from Toronto to Windsor and Sarnia operated on the South Main Line (SML) through Brantford using a mixture of conventional, locomotive-hauled trains and some RDCs, making cross-platform connections with the NML trains at London.

In 1986, its funding already under attack by the Mulroney government, VIA altered the NML operating plan. The Stratford-Toronto train was dropped and two of the four Toronto-Sarnia roundtrips previously operated on the SML were transferred to the NML. Through all of this, the best running times remained at a respectable two hours and 50 minutes.

Then, after years of ignoring the declining state of the trains themselves, the government of the day decided to simply apply drastic surgery to Canada's so-called rail passenger problem. The answer had long been strong medicine and therapy, but certainly not a brutal amputation.

On January 14, 1990, as a result of the Mulroney government's 52-per-cent cut to the VIA system, the NML's service fell to the lowest level since it was opened for business from Toronto to London by the Grand Trunk Railway in 1858: two trains daily in each direction.

The 1990s were tough years for VIA, which was constantly having its budget reduced by a succession of federal governments of two political stripes. The appointment of pro-rail Minister of Transport David Collenette brought some improvements, including the addition of a Kitchener-Toronto roundtrip, which was eventually extended to London.

In November 2009, VIA was set to announce a major upgrading of the NML's infrastructure, fleet and service levels. Using remanufactured Budd RDCs, plus track and signal improvements to be undertaken in conjunction with GO's investment in the Toronto-Kitchener portion of the line, NML service would have jumped to six roundtrips daily over the full Toronto-London route. For a variety of reasons never fully explained by VIA, this plan was quietly dropped.

Worse, the Harper government's 10 per cent VIA budget reduction of 2012 undid the previous minor improvements, cutting the service back to two roundtrips daily in October of that year, with one of them remaining as the single service to and from Sarnia.

Also disturbing has been the lengthening of the schedule, with the best-performing train now requiring three hours and 24 minutes for the run. As well, on-time performance has become erratic and at times awful. This has been due partially to the GO infrastructure work on its portion of the line, primarily on the section from Toronto Union Station to the new spur where the recently-launched Union Pearson Express (UPX) diverges to Pearson International Airport.

However, the bulk of the delays have been due to freight congestion on the CN-owned portion of the route between Bramalea and Georgetown. Conflicts with the heavy freight traffic have on many occasions severely disrupted the NML service.

North Main Line Performance: 1965-2015

YEAR	RUNNING TIME	DAILY ROUNDTRIPS
1965	2'55"	5*
1975	2'50"	5**
1980	2'50"	5**
1985	2'50"	5**
1990	2'50"	2
1995	2'41"	2
2000	2'47"	3
2005	3'00"	3
2010	2'58"	3
2015	3'24"	2

* 3 Toronto-London and 2 Toronto-Guelph

** 4 Toronto-London and 1 Toronto-Stratford

Today, all of VIA's Southwestern Ontario trains are handling fewer passengers and the downturn doesn't seem to have ended. The region's economic troubles have no doubt contributed to this decline, but so have VIA's on-time performance and its high fares.

All of these problems conspire to make the NML perform at less than its potential. While VIA has outlined a sketchy improvement plan recently, it will take an uncertain amount of time to implement with questionable financial, ridership and service improvements. More is required.

This plan provides options that can be implemented within one year to bring highly useful, cost-effective NML improvements pending the larger decisions the next federal government will have to make about the future of VIA following the October 19 election.

2.0 What's the Matter With VIA?

So, what's the matter with VIA? Many things – and most date back to long before VIA was formed officially in January 1977 as a Crown corporation to take over and allegedly revive Canada's declining rail passenger network.

The process to create VIA began in 1972, when Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's government made a campaign promise to consolidate and renew the remaining passenger trains then being operated by Canadian National Railways (CN) and the Canadian Pacific Railway (CP); very little happened afterward. The CN and CP trains continued to operate despite the extensive government funding of highways and commercial aviation, surviving on an 80 per cent subsidy. They also continued to age, driving their operating costs up and their passenger appeal down.

The rail revival promise was made again by the Trudeau government during the 1974 election campaign. This endorsement was spurred largely by the growing environmental movement, the impact of the energy crisis created by the 1973-1974 OPEC oil embargo and the passenger progress being made in the U.S. There, a fitful revival had begun under Amtrak, which took over the bulk of the U.S. passenger trains from the freight railways on May 1, 1971.

A policy statement by the Trudeau government in January 1976 finally set the wheels in motion by proposing to take over the remaining passenger trains through a new division that CN had formed known as VIA CN. But the subsequent establishment of VIA as a new, stand-alone Crown corporation became a series of legislative expedencies that never did the job fully or properly, as had been accomplished in the U.S. through Amtrak's comprehensive enabling act.

In truth, VIA has been in trouble since the initial policy statement on rail passenger service was made in 1976. Former Amtrak president and Cape Breton resident David Gunn told a *Moncton Times-Transcript* reporter in September 2013, "VIA has basically been going out of business. All of the actions from VIA have been basically reducing service since it was set up."

2.1 VIA's Systemic Flaws

The causes of this admittedly depressing situation that Gunn has accurately described are many; this is not the place to reiterate them. The details of VIA's historic misfortune may be found in the May 2013 report undertaken on behalf of MP Bruce Hyer, *A Wedding Band of Confederation: Restoring Rail Passenger Service to Ontario's North Shore and Across Canada*, and the October 2014 report, *Out of Steam: The Urgent Need to Modernize VIA Rail Canada*.

http://brucehyer.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Bruce_Hyer_PassengerRailReport-120603.pdf

<http://transport-action-ontario.com/wordpress/?p=434>

All that need be said is that VIA's systemic problems come down to a series of broad and very daunting issues, all of which require interlocking action by the next federal government. These include:

- No enabling legislation to establish VIA's mandate, rights and obligations;
- No Parliamentary oversight or input into any aspects of VIA's continued functioning;
- Inadequate funding and no budgetary assurances, making both short- and long-range planning difficult;
- Politicized board and management lacking real-world railway experience;
- Over-priced and inadequate train service agreements with the freight railways, which lack passenger priority provisions;
- Managerial fear of freight railway retaliation if VIA employs Section 152 of the *Canada Transportation Act* to assure adequate service and costing;
- The oldest main line fleet in the industrialized world; and
- Crumbling infrastructure on some of the freight short line railways on which VIA is dependent for track access.

Any revival of VIA service on the NML is going to have to be underpinned by the correction of these systemic flaws. What now complicates the matter is a series of schemes recently floated by VIA's politically-appointed senior management team.

2.2 VIA's Questionable Proposals

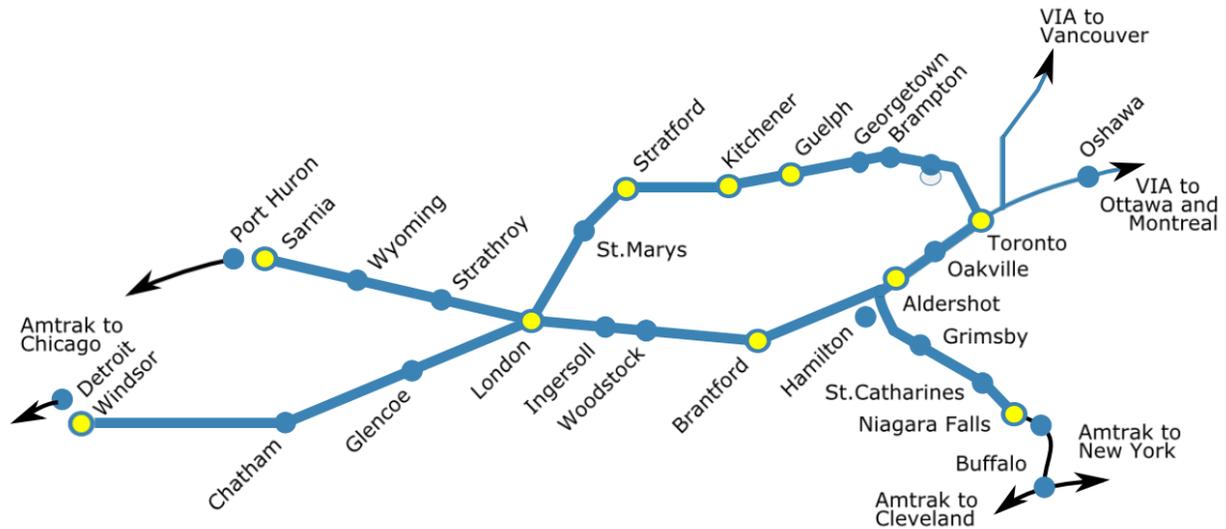
Following the October 2012 cuts to VIA's NML and other services coast to coast, the public responded by calling on elected officials to reverse them. Groups such as Save VIA in St. Marys and Transport Action Ontario notched up their advocacy and delved into the issue by examining the whole VIA problem, not just certain lines, such as the NML.

The response to this public activism by the VIA management team and its political masters was nothing. The Harper government constantly issued boilerplate statements saying VIA is "an arm's-length Crown corporation that makes its decisions based on the needs of modern travellers and the funding provide to it."

In the absence of a *VIA Rail Canada Act*, VIA is tightly controlled by whatever government is in power. Its prime means of control is simple: funding. The size and quality of VIA's operations are directly tied to the size of its annual grant and how it is applied.

To its credit, the current government provided VIA with slightly in excess of \$1 billion for capital renewal beginning in 2007. However, these funds went to projects that couldn't make an appreciable difference in VIA's downward trend after decades of under-investment. Virtually all of them can be characterized as Band-Aids that went over-budget and over-schedule. VIA's ridership, revenues and cost recovery have not improved as a result.

VIA RAIL CANADA SOUTHWESTERN ONTARIO NETWORK IN 2015



A change in management at VIA in May 2014 brought in a new CEO who had been a member of the previous team and has long ties to the Conservative Party. Under his leadership, VIA began making a number of announcements on its future course. Most disturbing is the new CEO's contention that the Harper government had supplied enough money to VIA and it would be "unfair" to expect more. He added, "VIA Rail is an increasing burden on Canada's taxpayers due to deteriorating on-time performance and the lack of frequencies to be relevant."

Given the depths of VIA's accumulated woes and the fact that it will require steady and precise capital funding to get it out of its deep pit, this rings alarm bells. This is even more the case when it's put in the context of the misdirected capital funding supplied by this government since 2007. This funding was not a silver bullet that would or ever could cure VIA's multiple ills.

Now, VIA is talking about major works that would make the previous ones pale by comparison. The focal point is a new, 110-mph line in the Montreal-Ottawa-Toronto triangle that VIA says the private sector will finance and build, and for which VIA would pay a user fee. To end the delays and conflicts in its shared use of busy CN freight main lines, this latest plan would make use of the VIA-owned line from just west Montreal to Ottawa and on to Smiths Falls.

From there, the VIA-only tracks would parallel CP's Montreal-Toronto freight line for 15.5 miles and veer off on the abandoned portion of the CP Havelock Subdivision, with the 92 missing miles rebuilt. From Havelock west, VIA's new tracks would be built alongside the active CP freight line through Peterborough to Leaside, then down the Don Valley to Union Station over a mothballed ex-CP line owned by GO Transit. The cost is pegged at \$3 billion and VIA's CEO says the private sector will want a double-digit annual return on its investment. That would be equal to VIA's entire annual budget for its nationwide operations.

What about all those high-ridership towns and cities served by VIA on the CN line between Toronto and Montreal, and on which a previous VIA scheme invested more than \$400 million? Would there be enough business generated on the dedicated route through Peterborough to cover the losses on the existing routes if they were continued? Has CP been consulted? No answers have been forthcoming from VIA.

As for new equipment – the single biggest problem for VIA because of the age and type of its current fleet – this would come after the private sector built the dedicated line. With 110-mph service, VIA says these trains would have to be very specialized and would need to fit with the infrastructure. This ignores the fact that VIA's current trains already operate at up to 100 mph and 125-mph equipment is now under construction in the U.S. for Amtrak and its state funding partners for several routes, including Chicago-Detroit.

On top of this questionable scheme, there is now the Southwestern Ontario plan that VIA unveiled at a June 16, 2015, Stratford Chamber of Commerce luncheon. This includes a new Stratford-Toronto morning train, an additional Toronto-Sarnia roundtrip, shifting the Sarnia trains from the NML to the SML through Brantford line, and a series of self-propelled RDC shuttles from London to Windsor and Sarnia.

Skeptical questions about this plan were asked by members of the luncheon audience in Stratford and at a similar event in Sarnia on June 17. Have negotiations for the new trains occurred with CN, GO and the Goderich-Exeter Railway, over which these trains will run? No. Have these proposed frequencies been put through a business case analysis? No. Is there enough equipment to do this? Maybe.

As for an implementation date, VIA has stated, "The full plan is intended to be complete by the end of 2015, with potential implementation in 2016. Of course, this is dependent on the support we receive from the communities we are serving."

What was also stated at the public presentations was VIA's expectation that an admittedly unscientific threshold of 120 passengers per train must be attained to cover operating costs and make these trains permanent entries in the VIA timetable. The luncheon attendees were also told the communities were expected to drum up the required business or the "use it or lose it" rule would be rigidly applied. As one of the mayors in attendance commented, he wasn't aware that one of his unpaid jobs was acting as the VIA marketing department.

It is apparent to many rail industry observers that VIA has no real plan or the assured funding to implement these sketchy schemes. As it has been since the dawn of VIA 38 years ago, its future will be tied to the policies, decisions and funding supplied by the next federal government. This adds up to no quick action on improving the NML or any other VIA line.

3.0 The Need for Equipment Solutions

One of VIA's most pressing issues – and one which isn't currently being addressed – is its desperate need for new equipment. VIA today operates what is commonly regarded as the oldest fleet of passenger trains in frontline service in the industrialized world. Although rebuilt in the 1990s, some of the rolling stock used daily on the NML dates back to 1946.

As well, VIA's botched equipment rebuilding programs have left it short of certain types of rolling stock. The corporation recently issued a request for expressions of interest from qualified firms for the leasing of additional cars.

VIA's statements regarding the purchase of new equipment –which is supposed to occur after the deal is reached for the private-sector construction of its dedicated Toronto-Ottawa-Montreal line – are not reassuring. An estimation of new equipment not arriving for at least another seven years is quite alarming. VIA cannot survive on its limited federal funding with the high-cost, over-aged fleet it now employs.

One of the problems affecting service on the NML and all the other segments that compose VIA's Quebec-Windsor Corridor is not just the rolling stock's age, but its type, which is defined as conventional, locomotive-hauled equipment. In main line service, it can operate in one direction only and it must be turned by means of a wye track – a three-point turn for trains – or a loop track. This is a time-consuming process that keeps the trains and crews out of revenue-producing service for long periods of time and prevents quick turnarounds at end terminals.

The alternative is push-pull cars, which GO Transit and most other intercity and commuter passenger railways use. In push-pull operation, a passenger train has a locomotive at one end and a fully-equipped cab car on the other. The cab car duplicates the controls in the locomotive. Under this system, a train arriving at its terminal can be ready to head in the opposite direction within the time it takes for passengers to disembark and board, and the locomotive crew to walk to the opposite end of the train.

Trains that sit for hours in their end terminals or require lengthy procedures to be reversed don't earn revenue. None of VIA's trains are equipped with cab cars and they are, therefore, not available for as much revenue-producing service as push-pull equipment.

This was also a problem for Amtrak in its earliest years. But Amtrak has proved itself to be more resourceful than VIA. When one generation of its locomotives was past the point of being economically rebuilt – as VIA recently did with locomotives of a similar vintage – Amtrak gutted them of their diesel engines and traction gear, turning them into inexpensive cab-baggage cars.

As well, when the self-propelled, electrically-powered Metroliner cars used on its Northeast Corridor reached the end of their useful lives, Amtrak gutted them and converted them into cab-coaches to be used with both its electric and diesel trains.

Amtrak has also benefitted from the purchase by the State of California of bi-level push-pull trainsets used on its state-supported routes throughout the state. It will soon be operating a new generation of these bi-level, push-pull trains at up to 125 mph on state-supported routes in California, Illinois, Missouri and Michigan. The proven benefits of bi-level equipment in intercity and commuter service around the world brings up an important issue in terms of VIA's future fleet. With the added capacity and reduced per-passenger cost of this equipment, it must be part of the long-term fleet strategy.

Meanwhile, there is no reason why VIA can't implement some of the operating concepts from Amtrak's successful operating plan to bring cost-effective, push-pull service to the NML and other corridor routes in the near future.

3.1 Double-Locomotive Push-Pull Trainsets

While it's far from the ideal solution, there is a method by which VIA could quickly implement push-pull operation on the NML. By assigning two locomotives to each train – one on either end of the locomotive-hauled rolling stock – VIA could dispense with the need to turn its trains at London, Windsor, Sarnia and Toronto. This would make them available for service within 30 minutes of their arrival at their terminals.



Makeshift push-pull operation using two locomotives is already employed on some of VIA's Quebec City-Montreal-Ottawa trains, as shown above on the Montreal-Ottawa line. Photo by Ray Farand © 2012

VIA owns more locomotives than it currently requires for its Quebec-Windsor Corridor assignments. However, if VIA believes this wouldn't provide enough spare motive power to cover for any locomotive failures or train delays, the answer is the short-term acquisition of other locomotives from equipment leasing companies. There are service-ready passenger locomotives now available, including some former GO units.

Under such a plan, an immediate increase in NML service could be affected. With a locomotive on each end, VIA #85 could be sent back to Toronto within 30 minutes of its arrival in London. With a slight rescheduling of departure times, the trainset used for trains #85/88 could make a roundtrip to Toronto and be available in London for a 21:00 departure eastbound.

VIA already employs this technique to through-route some of its trains on the Quebec City-Montreal/Montreal-Ottawa run. Westbound trains from Quebec City enter Montreal Central Station pointed north, but to continue on to Ottawa, they must proceed south out of the station to reach the Ottawa line. To make it possible for these trains to run through Montreal without any back-up movements, the dual-locomotive approach is used. This short-term strategy has definite potential for short-term improvement of the NML service.

3.2 Boise Budd Cab Cars

Another option would be leasing what are known as Boise Budd cars. In the 1970s, Boston's Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) sent its fleet of tired Budd rail diesel cars (RDCs) for remanufacturing in Boise, Idaho. There, they were stripped of their propulsion gear and modified for push-pull service with diesel locomotives. Some of the RDCs were rebuilt as straight coaches and others were provided with control gear for use as cab-coaches.



A Boise Budd cab car in use on the York-Durham Heritage Railway in Uxbridge. Photo by Railfan Max © 2014

Long retired by the MBTA, this thrifty push-pull equipment went on to provide additional service on some of the new “starter” commuter rail systems that have been established in the U.S. in the last quarter-century. From there, it has gone on to tourist train service across North America. Many of these cars – particularly the cab cars – are now languishing unused on tourist railways or available at low cost from secondhand equipment brokers.

Ironically, two of these Boise Budd cars, plus three of the coaches, are now being used on the York-Durham Heritage Railway between Stouffville and Uxbridge.

The acquisition of a small number of these Boise Budd cab cars for low-cost rehabilitation for short-term use on the NML is worthy of investigation by VIA. Coupled to the locomotive-hauled Budd rolling stock now employed by VIA on several trains in Southwestern Ontario – including trains #85/88 on the NML – the result would be the cost-effective creation of push-pull consists that could lower operating costs and enable the addition of more NML frequencies without any substantial capital outlay or operating costs.

3.3 Trinity Railway Express RDCs

For more than 30 years, self-propelled Budd rail diesel cars (RDCs) were a mainstay of the services provided by CN and then VIA on the NML. Operable singly or in multi-car trains, the RDCs were more cost-effective than locomotive-hauled trains that required less than five cars. They were also bi-directional, with operating cabs on either end. The result was that the RDCs provided the equivalent of push-pull service and didn’t require turning at the end of each run.



Ex-VIA RDCs in use on the Dallas-Fort Worth Trinity Railway Express. Photo by Bill Hakkarinen © 2000

Except for its Sudbury-White River train and its suspended service on Vancouver Island, VIA ceased using this flexible equipment at the time of the Mulroney government's cuts in 1990. The VIA fleet was sold to a handful of other operators and preservation groups, or for scrap.

Thirteen VIA RDCs were purchased to launch the Dallas-Fort Worth area's commuter rail service, the Trinity Railway Express (TRE), in 1996 and rebuilt by CN. They have been replaced on TRE's main service by Bombardier bi-level push-pull trains identical to GO's. These RDCs were then used as spare and off-peak trains, and to launch the region's Denton County A Train pending the arrival of new equipment. The TRE RDCs are now stored and available for lease.

The problem with trying to use this equipment in Canada – and which VIA hasn't acknowledged in its sketchy plan to run RDC shuttle trains from London to both Windsor and Sarnia – is that CN prohibits their use at speeds greater than 50 mph. Although CN owned a large fleet of these cars, which VIA purchased and combined with the former CP RDCs to form the world's largest fleet, CN now refuses to allow their operation on its lines at maximum passenger speeds. CN says they don't reliably trip rail traffic control and grade crossing protection track circuits. While there are ways to ensure the RDCs do trip the signals, CN has turned a deaf ear to any suggested solutions.

If the problems CN alleges can be resolved or refuted, then the short-term use of the 13 TRE RDCs would provide another equipment option for VIA. They are well suited for NML service. The lower operating cost of the RDCs and their ability to make quick terminal turnarounds would make it fiscally viable to introduce additional NML frequencies at little extra cost.

3.4 Michigan Gallery Cars

In 2010, the Michigan Department of Transportation (DOT) leased 23 retired Budd stainless steel gallery coaches and cab cars for use on two planned commuter rail projects in southeastern Michigan. The cars had been built originally for Chicago's Metra transit agency and were subsequently refurbished by a Michigan remanufacturing firm. But the two projects have been seriously delayed and the Michigan DOT is now interested in leasing the cars out until the projects are ready to roll.

A gallery car is a variation on the full bi-level cars familiar to GO users. Although labelled as double-deckers and bi-levels, gallery cars lack a full upper deck. Instead, rows of single seats are suspended on each side on balconies or galleries above the lower level's 2+2 seating. These upper seats are reached by staircases near the sliding doors in the middle of the cars.

While not as desirable as full bi-levels, the high-capacity gallery cars are nonetheless efficient and more cost-effective than VIA's single-level cars. There are enough gallery coaches and cab cars to form seven three-car trainsets, with two coaches available as spares.



Fully-refurbished Budd gallery coaches and cab cars, which are available for lease from the Michigan DOT. Photos courtesy of the Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers

Although the Michigan gallery cars lack food and beverage facilities, this could be remedied by assigning a VIA single-level Budd coach or club car, equipped with a galley to provide these amenities, to operate in each gallery car trainset.

Although not as spacious and luxurious as VIA's single-level cars, the gallery cars would offer capacity and flexibility that VIA does not have. This would underpin any plan for frequency increases on the NML and other Southwestern Ontario routes. Setting the fares slightly lower for the trains assigned the gallery cars would be a logical way to compensate for the slight drop in comfort, while also stimulating ridership.

3.5 New Jersey Transit Comet Cars

Although more time consuming than the other options, one that should be considered in light of the uncertain purchase of new VIA rolling stock is a plan undertaken by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). With ridership rising steadily on the services it partners with Amtrak to operate on three corridors, Caltrans acquired 14 former New Jersey Transit Comet commuter cars in 2012. The equipment was rebuilt by Amtrak to provide additional, short-term capacity on the California routes pending the delivery of its new fleet of 125-mph bi-level push-pull cars, beginning in 2016.

The Comet cars now operate in push-pull service on the Oakland-Bakersfield San Joaquin Corridor. Each train consists of a locomotive, six refurbished Comets, an Amtrak dinette car and one of the cab-baggage cars Amtrak recycled from life-expired diesel locomotives.

A similar approach could be taken at low cost for VIA's NML. There are several Comet coaches and cab cars available on the used rolling stock market, including a set of five currently being sold for \$30,000 per car. Two sets of these cars, each with a cab car and a VIA Budd stainless steel coach or club car to provide snack and refreshment service, would provide enough equipment to double the current NML service frequency. As with the less-spacious gallery cars, the seats in the rebuilt Comet cars would be priced to offer a budget travel option and stimulate ridership.



A low-cost Amtrak/Caltrans Comet push-pull trainset calls on Martinez, California, on its run from Oakland to Bakersfield. Photo by Jamie West © 2015

SOUTHERN ONTARIO'S RAIL PASSENGER SYSTEM IN 1962



SOUTHERN ONTARIO'S RAIL PASSENGER SYSTEM IN 2015



4.0 Enhanced Marketing and Promotion

At the town hall meetings sponsored throughout Southwestern Ontario by Save VIA, Transport Action Ontario and other groups, two messages rang out clearly: (1) VIA doesn't do an adequate job of promoting its services within the region; and (2) VIA's fares are too high and too difficult to even understand when they are offered at reduced rates on its website.

Over the last decade, VIA has progressively blanded its products of anything that could be called an evocation of the unique virtues of rail passenger travel. It has become colourless. This has extended from the removal of the names of all its trains, with the exception of the iconic *Ocean* and *Canadian*. Distinctive train names such as *Rapido*, *Mohawk*, *Trillium* and *Forest City* have been swept away. So, too have the traditional names for passenger accommodations, with the club cars becoming airline-style Business Class and sleeping car spaces reduced to cabins, instead of roomettes, bedrooms and drawing rooms.

VIA has never identified each of the route segments that comprise its Quebec-Windsor Corridor by name, as is done on many U.S. routes. There, Amtrak and its state partners operate corridors with colourful names such as the Keystone, Empire, Wolverine and Piedmont. The U.S. routes also have logos and marketing campaigns to help boost the profile and the ridership of these services. Some even have their own websites.

The application of a name and a logo to a rail passenger route is a very low-cost effort that has the potential for many improvements. This needs to be investigated closely by VIA if it hopes to generate the ridership and revenue to sustain its current trains, let alone any new ones being promised for delivery after the October 19 election.



4.1 Re-Branding the North Main Line

In the interest of spurring VIA's marketing efforts and building ridership on the blandly-named NML, Save VIA will launch its own "Name That Train" contest with the release of this plan at the day-long rally in St. Marys on July 30, 2015. The committee members will select the best public submissions and forward them to VIA's marketing staff.

It is hoped that similar efforts will be undertaken by other groups concerned with VIA's fate and the communities themselves, which have engaged to an encouraging degree in the various advocacy efforts to highlight VIA's plight and assist with its overdue renewal.

4.2 A Fairer Fare Plan

VIA's fares are high for two reasons. The first is that high cost-recovery targets were forced on the corporation by the Mulroney government in 1990. This was partially due to extensive lobbying by central Canadian bus operators, which always portrayed VIA as unfair, subsidized competition. Their view failed to account for the fact that they benefitted directly from highways and other infrastructure and services provided at public expense and which were never adequately repaid through user fees.

The bus industry's contention it would profit if VIA disappeared proved false. Where VIA has been eliminated and now doesn't operate in competition with privately-owned bus companies, the bus industry's decades-long decline continued. Today, Canada's intercity bus system is in steep decline and some members of the industry believe it won't exist within a decade.

VIA's fares are also high, especially compared with Amtrak, because it is saddled with old, high-cost equipment and the high track access charges it must pay the freight railways to operate on the bulk of its routes. This combination, coupled with the high cost-recovery targets set by the federal government, has led to the problem with VIA's fare levels.

An alternate approach to this situation is to attempt to encourage more travellers to use VIA and occupy more of the capacity it provides daily. This was the thrust of CN's successful Red, White and Blue fare plan in the 1960s and '70s. It was predicated on the reality that half-empty trains were less cost-effective than those that departed full thanks to a logical pricing of the available space to encourage its full use.

VIA's various discount plans might be said to be a move in this direction. The problem for many users – especially now that so many stations have been de-staffed – is that they have to spend a considerable time on their computers searching for these unpredictable "spot specials" and book them within a narrow window. The CN plan was better because it was based on days and trains that were advertised consistently on the basis of the discounts they offered throughout a calendar period.



30% off

**BRING A FRIEND
AND GET 30% off
A COMPANION TICKET**

North Carolina's
AMTRAK
ncbytrain.org
800-BY-TRAIN



**College Student?
Get 15% Off Your Ticket!**
Click here for details.

With the use of some of the less-spacious equipment suggested in Chapter 3 of this plan, a perfect opportunity would be created for VIA to test the market on the NML and elsewhere to see if a regular, easy-to-understand fare plan wouldn't attract more passengers consistently, driving usage, revenue and cost recovery higher.

4.3 Selling the Region's Attractions

Many residents and users of the NML believe VIA's marketing department gives it inadequate attention. It would be difficult to disagree with that view. The same could also be said for every VIA route outside the Montreal-Ottawa-Toronto "golden triangle" within its Quebec-Windsor Corridor. Even there, residents of the intermediate communities voice similar views.

In its early days, when it was staffed by railroaders with extensive experience in passenger operations and marketing at CN and CP, VIA was quite aggressive in selling its trains in concert with the attractions available at numerous points throughout its system. This approach seems to have been forgotten at VIA today. With the number of superior attractions available on the NML, this issue needs to be revisited in consultation with the chambers of commerce, tourism agencies and private-sector operators along its length.

Among those many tourism-related operators on or close to the NML that would have much to contribute to the development of rail traffic destined to their venues are:

- Stratford Festival;
- Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame;
- Blyth Festival;
- Summer and fall fairs; and
- Local inn, spa and resort operators.

It is recommended that VIA make these parties – not local governments and well-meaning volunteer citizens’ groups – the target of its recent efforts to stimulate ridership.

There are also many events and year-round attractions in the Greater Toronto Area that regularly draw business from the communities along the NML. Sporting, entertainment and cultural events are well suited for linkages with VIA special fares and package offers.

For a working model, VIA would do well to consult with Amtrak. The U.S. system markets a large selection of regular and special package trips through its Amtrak Vacations division. On many of the state-supported corridors, close partnerships with sports, entertainment and cultural event operators have yielded substantial traffic, as well as very attractive discounted fares for frequent users.

A prime example is the Amtrak/Caltrans Capitol Corridor between San Jose, Oakland and Sacramento. In addition to one-way and roundtrip tickets, the Capitol Corridor offers a wide range of discounted fare options, including an unlimited monthly pass and 10-ride tickets. There are numerous discounts for seniors, students, children, disabled persons, veterans, active-duty military personnel, groups of 20 or more and members of the American Automobile Association and the National Association of Railroad Passengers.

From a tourism and leisure travel perspective, the Capitol Corridor offers working examples of partnerships that could be easily duplicated by VIA. As well as all-purpose travel discounts, the Capitol Corridor also offers special fares in partnership with the Oakland Raiders and California Golden Bears football teams, Levi’s Stadium in Santa Clara and regional special event operators.

The success of this approach on the Capitol Corridor should be both studied and emulated by VIA on the NML and other routes.

4.4 Charter Car Operations

Although VIA does offer a charter car service, you’d never know it from the lack of promotion it receives. But what it offers could easily be built into a regular and lucrative market in conjunction with various tourism, sports and entertainment operators on the NML.

In addition to the availability of charter rates for large parties, VIA also possesses what most passenger railways would regard as a unique service offering in the form of its lounge/party car *Glenfraser*. Rebuilt from an old coach and thoroughly modernized, the *Glenfraser* was briefly used in conjunction with some tourism-related weekend packages on the Toronto-Niagara Falls line several years ago. The onboard extras – in addition to the spaciousness of the car itself – included Niagara Region wine tasting sessions and presentations on the distinctive historical, cultural and natural attractions the region offers visitors.



VIA's *Glenfraser* in charter service on the tail end of a Montreal-Toronto train. Photo by Dan Tweedle © 2010

This short-lived innovation needs to be revisited in relation to traffic development on the NML. In combination with the Stratford Festival, the *Glenfraser* could be part of packages offering a special service within the consists of the regularly-scheduled trains on days when matinee performances are scheduled. Food, refreshments and onboard entertainment linked to the Stratford performances would be provided in each direction as part of a package marketed by both VIA and the theatre operators.



A lower-scale version of this service – minus the food and refreshments – is offered annually on the Albuquerque area’s New Mexico Rail Runner Express as part of its Shakespeare on the Rails series, which is produced by University of New Mexico students.

The Rail Runner Express – and several other U.S. commuter rail systems – also link with local producers and businesses to present other special tourism-related services, such as biking discovery tours and locally-themed events such as the Rail Runner’s RAILS, Trails and Ales program, which is mounted in conjunction with the craft breweries in Albuquerque and Santa Fe.

What is required on the NML and throughout the VIA system is some of the imagination applied by Amtrak, U.S. commuter railways and their local tourist industry and business partners. This has been sadly missing at VIA.



4.5 Seasonal GO Equipment Leasing

The addition of extra NML trains operated for seasonal events would be possible through weekend and holiday leasing of GO bi-level trainsets, when they’re not required for commuter service. This would allow for specials similar to those GO now provides on its Barrie and Niagara Falls lines. As occurs with the GO services, these trains would also make possible trips for NML residents wishing to take in sporting, entertainment and leisure activities in Toronto.

In its early years, VIA frequently leased GO equipment when it was faced with ridership surges during holiday periods. Although not as comfortable as intercity rolling stock, VIA improved the attractiveness of these extra trains by setting up small snack and beverage sales areas. The inclusion of bike storage areas on some of the GO equipment today adds another attraction to compensate for the less-than-ideal seating for longer trips.

As has been suggested with other equipment options previously discussed, the operation of GO trainsets for special events and occasions could be matched with reduced fares that would compensate for less spaciousness than on VIA's intercity equipment.

4.6 Improved Union Pearson Express Connection

Although VIA has partnered with Metrolinx for joint ticketing that enables VIA passengers to also travel on the new Union Pearson Express (UPX) to reach Pearson International Airport (PIA), it currently isn't very attractive for passengers on the NML. To connect with the UPX trains, VIA NML passengers must travel all the way to Toronto Union Station. This adds considerable time and cost to the combined, two-train trip.

VIA is currently working with Metrolinx to add a stop for NML trains at the GO/UPX Weston station. More useful would be establishing a joint VIA/UPX/GO stop near the Woodbine Racetrack, just south of where the UPX spur line diverges to enter PIA. Such a station was originally considered by Metrolinx, but it has fallen off its agenda, at least temporarily.

While it would take time and it would come with a capital cost, a Woodbine station would be an appropriate partnership opportunity for federally-owned VIA and provincially-owned Metrolinx. For NML passengers, it would reduce the time and cost of using the two rail services for trips to PIA from points along the NML, as well as the VIA lines to Windsor and Sarnia.



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5.0 Operating Improvements

A definitive solution of the many operational complications bedeviling VIA operations across its nationwide system will not come easily or inexpensively. But there are some that can be implemented at little or no additional cost on the NML. These will improve VIA's on-time performance and reduce its running times. One of these solutions is literally sitting on the ground, bought and paid for, but still not delivering any benefits.

5.1 Completion of VIA's 2009 North Main Line Project

One strange hangover from VIA's cancelled 2009 plan to substantially upgrade its NML service is a \$28.1-million capital improvement project. The improvements to be made over the full route from Toronto to London were to be undertaken in partnership with Metrolinx for its Union Pearson Express service and the expansion of the GO Georgetown Line and its extension to Kitchener. This left VIA with a variety of work west of Kitchener, including the installation of continuous welded rail, improvements to the grade crossing protection systems and the installation of a new centralized traffic control (CTC) system.

Although the VIA NML expansion project was quietly dropped, the capital works west of Kitchener proceeded. Some of the welded rail has been installed and upgrades to some grade crossings have occurred. The CTC system has been in place for over a year, but there is no indication when it will be activated. VIA's president said in a private meeting in St. Marys on June 16 that this would occur "soon."

The CTC system will not only expand the capacity of the NML west of Kitchener, it will enable speed increases and reductions in the running times of VIA's trains. Combined with all the improvements made by GO on its line segments, this could easily reduce the Toronto-London running time by 30 minutes or more, bringing the end-to-end running time down to less than three hours and, hopefully, even more in the near future. Whatever is stalling the completion of this already-funded work, it needs to be addressed now.

5.2 Reducing CN Freight Conflicts

As the nature of main line freight railroading has changed over the last decade, it has made it more difficult to mix short, fast passenger trains with long, slower freight trains. CN and CP freight trains have grown longer and it is more difficult to accommodate them on lines where they often won't fit in the sidings. The shorter VIA trains are invariably the ones that get put "in the hole" to give the freight trains of the companies that own the lines priority.

However, there are instances where VIA's own operating practices set up situations that lead to conflicts between the two types of trains. One of those is on the NML.

Once completely owned by CN, the NML is composed of line segments that are now owned by GO (Toronto Union-Bramalea and Georgetown-Kitchener), CN (Bramalea-Georgetown and London Junction-London) and the Goderich-Exeter Railway (Kitchener-London Junction), with the latter leasing its line from CN.

The most constrained portion of this route is the CN section between Bramalea and Georgetown. At the junction known as Halwest, GO's multiple-track Weston Subdivision connects with the CN Halton Subdivision. It is a largely double-track line that is a component of CN's main freight routes from Toronto to both the Niagara Region and the U.S. Midwest via Sarnia. Trains departing from CN's main classification and intermodal yards east of the Halwest junction veer off the NML passenger route and down to Milton and Burlington at the junction point just west of Georgetown known as Silver. Crossover moves between the north and south track are frequent occurrences and are only partially mitigated by the short triple-track section between Brampton and Georgetown at the Mount Pleasant GO station.

With a heavy flow of CN freight and, during peak commute periods, GO commuter trains, many operating crews refer to their dash over this line segment as "running the gauntlet."



In less constrained times, a four-car CN train of Budd RDCs stops at Brampton on its run from Stratford. Today, there is GO service on the line and a south-side platform, in addition to the north-side one seen here. There is also considerably more freight traffic and competition for track time. Photo by Peter A. Cox © 1965

VIA trains entering the Halton Subdivision at Halwest must cross over to the north track to stop at Brampton. At Georgetown, the VIA trains cross back to the south track for their station stop. They then make a third crossover move to diverge from the north track of the CN Halton Subdivision to the GO Guelph Subdivision at the junction point known as Silver and proceed west to London.

One must ask why VIA trains make three crossover moves, setting up conflicts with the CN freight trains. Both the Brampton and Georgetown stations are now unstaffed, although they do have self-service ticketing terminals and passenger information display boards. As well, the Brampton station has platforms on both sides of the double-track main line and they are fully accessible by elevator. There is no need for VIA's trains to stop at Brampton on the north track.

The simple solution here is to keep VIA's trains on the south track between Brampton and Georgetown, where there is only the one south-side platform usable by VIA. This would eliminate two crossover moves for every VIA train and greatly reduce the chance of delays due to conflicts with CN's freight trains. At Brampton, appropriate signage in the station building and on the north-side platform would direct VIA passengers to the south platform.

A longer-term solution is also possible at no cost to VIA. The GO layover yard on the north side of the CN Halton Subdivision at Georgetown also doubles as a passenger handling facility for some of its trains. It has passenger platforms connected to the station, the south platform and the parking lot by a pedestrian tunnel. Ultimately, a more accessible connection to these south-side facilities will be built.

When that occurs, VIA could use one of the tracks and platforms inside the GO yard/station facility for all of its arrivals and departures. This would enable the VIA trains to make their single crossover move in Bramalea at the Halwest junction. The north platform at Brampton would be used for all VIA arrivals and departures, and the trains would stay on the north main line track all the way to and from the Silver junction, west of Georgetown.

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6.0 Funding the North Main Line Improvements

The NML has inadvertently become a joint federal and provincial problem. GO's extension of its peak-hour Georgetown commuter rail service to Kitchener cut into VIA's market. Some former VIA passengers have been able to take advantage of the lower fares provided by the two GO frequencies on weekdays, as well as the off-peak bus service GO has also introduced. This has reduced VIA ridership and revenue, destabilizing an already shaky operation.

What taxpayers are facing now is a situation where their federal tax dollars are competing with their provincial tax dollars, yielding an unsatisfactory and expensive service by the two carriers. This is folly. It is being compounded by VIA's view that the NML is almost a lost cause and its best recourse may be to disappear from the scene. At the very least, VIA has no intention of meeting GO's competition with innovative pricing and service.

On the other hand, the provincial government has refused to acknowledge or take partial responsibility for the damage done to VIA by GO, or to face the fact that the most cost-effective solution would be a joint one. This would mean treating the NML through from Toronto to London as a whole, then cost-sharing the required services and improvements where appropriate.

This is the logical and cost-effective approach taken in many U.S. regions through the funding partnerships Amtrak has enjoyed with numerous state governments dating back to its formation in 1971. This approach was embodied in Amtrak's enabling legislation, the *Rail Passenger Service Act of 1970*.

One of the major problems is that there isn't a Canadian equivalent of Amtrak's legislation to, among other things, clearly set out the terms for these inter-governmental partnerships to pool resources and deliver services that meet a mixture of intercity and commuter needs jointly. MP Philip Toone (Gaspésie – Îles-de-la-Madeleine) attempted to correct this glaring flaw in Canada's national transportation legislation by drafting and tabling Bill C-640, *An Act Respecting VIA Rail Canada*.

Introduced in late 2014, Bill C-640 was supported by every opposition MP and defeated in 2015 by a unanimous vote against it by every MP of the Harper government, including those whose ridings are along the NML. But even in the absence of such an act, which embodied the mechanism for these Amtrak-style funding partnerships, such an approach can still be taken.

In 1991, following the devastating 52 per cent slashing of VIA by the Mulroney government, Premier Bob Rae's provincial government provided a portion of the funding to restore a London-Toronto VIA train on the South Main Line that ran eastbound in the morning and returned in the late afternoon. Although the provincial funding ended, that train still operates as VIA #82/83.

Such an approach is what is required now if the NML is going to be revived. With the introduction and planned expansion of the GO Kitchener service, the provincial government is now deeply involved in the future of the NML through the damage it has caused and its lack of concern for the portion west of Kitchener, which it steadfastly maintains is none of its concern.

At the same time, the provincial government announced its intention to build a new line segment from Kitchener to London, bypassing Stratford and St. Marys, to provide a high-speed rail passenger service of its own. The plan, announced just before the 2014 provincial election, is controversial, unsubstantiated and unfunded. The idea of the province building and operating a high-cost line of this type while VIA struggles to provide a decent conventional service on the route borders on madness and fiscal irresponsibility.

The solution – especially given the lack of progress on the high-speed scheme and the worsening provincial budgetary situation – is to forge a partnership with VIA. An excellent way for the province to take the first step at little cost would be for to eliminate or reduce the high fees it now charges VIA to use provincially-owned GO track segments, such as the Toronto-Bramalea and Georgetown-Kitchener portions of the NML.

As well, the federal and provincial governments are jointly sitting on nearly \$300 million that was earmarked in a complicated game of horse trading for another stillborn rail passenger project. The feds, thanks to the late Jim Flaherty and ex-MP Dean Del Mastro, wanted provincial participation in a scheme they championed to restore service to the Peterborough-Toronto route. At the same time, the provincial government of Premier Dalton McGuinty wanted a federal contribution to several GTA transit projects. The saw-off was the provision of the requested federal funds in exchange for the province putting up \$150 million to match the federal portion of what became known as the Shining Waters Railway.

The Peterborough project has become a mess to such an extent that it is now known within the rail industry as the Stagnant Waters Railway. It has lost both of its political sponsors and it is enmeshed in an ongoing round of studies. It cannot possibly be delivered for the original estimate and it is going to take many years to even advance it to the design and approval stage. Before it can even be delivered, the funding will “sunset” on December 31, 2017, and that not invested will be forfeited.

The answer is to continue with the low-cost engineering and market demand studies for the Peterborough project. But the bulk of the joint federal-provincial funding should be transferred to the NML and the other VIA services that desperately require proper funding just to survive. Since the Peterborough funding is going to expire, it should at least be put to productive use now.

7.0 Conclusions

VIA's NML needs serious attention today, not years away. It has endured too many years of neglect, mainly since a changing of the guard at VIA in late 2009 removed many seasoned passenger railroaders who saw great potential in the line and were working to bring about major improvements.

As the 2009 VIA plan proposed, the NML requires more frequencies, reduced running times, innovative pricing and better rolling stock. The objective should be a six-train service using three dedicated trainsets capable of making the full run in two hours and 45 minutes or less, as planned in 2009. The schedule would be approximately as shown in the tables below.

Proposed North Main Line Timetable – Westbound

STATION	NML #1	NML #3	NML #5	NML #7	NML #9	NML #11
Toronto Union	06:30	10:30	13:00	17:30	19:30	22:30
Weston	06:50	10:50	13:20	17:50	19:50	22:50
Brampton	07:05	11:05	13:35	18:05	20:05	23:05
Georgetown	07:20	11:20	13:50	18:20	20:20	23:20
Guelph	07:45	11:45	14:15	18:45	20:45	23:45
Kitchener	08:10	12:10	14:40	19:10	21:10	00:10
Stratford	08:35	12:35	15:05	19:35	21:35	00:35
St. Marys	08:55	12:55	15:25	19:55	21:55	00:55
London	09:15	13:15	15:45	20:15	22:15	01:15

Proposed North Main Line Timetable – Eastbound

STATION	NML #2	NML #4	NML #6	NML #8	NML #10	NML #12
London	06:00	08:00	11:00	15:00	19:00	22:30
St. Marys	06:20	08:20	11:20	15:20	19:20	22:50
Stratford	06:40	08:40	11:40	15:40	19:40	23:10
Kitchener	07:05	09:05	12:05	16:05	18:05	23:35
Guelph	07:30	09:30	12:30	16:30	18:30	00:01
Georgetown	07:55	09:55	12:55	16:55	18:55	00:25
Brampton	08:10	10:10	13:10	17:10	19:10	00:40
Weston	08:25	10:25	13:25	17:25	19:25	00:55
Toronto Union	08:45	10:45	13:45	17:45	19:45	01:15

The above running times are possible with proper operating practices, the completion of VIA's infrastructure work and any of the equipment options outlined in Chapter 3 of this plan.

Furthermore, the line capacity does exist to allow for the bulk of this service. CN has 24 track slots – 12 in each direction – available for passenger use on its Halton Subdivision between Bramalea and Georgetown. GO is currently using 14 of these slots, although one roundtrip only operates as far west as Mount Pleasant, on the triple-track section of the Halton Subdivision.

An easy solution is for one of the VIA roundtrips to replace a GO Toronto-Kitchener roundtrip that now operates on a schedule close to it. Passenger loads west of Georgetown are reportedly light and could easily be accommodated with adequate VIA train lengths. Alternately, VIA, GO and CN need to confer to determine how the two additional track slots required for a full VIA six-train schedule can be provided without negatively affecting the service of each operator.

Further along, it is clear some major infrastructure work will be required if the GO and VIA services are going to grow. This should be investigated by the two passenger carriers and CN to determine the requirements and reach a cost-sharing agreement fair to all three parties.

In the long run, a new approach to the funding and delivery of rail passenger service needs to be adopted by the next federal government. For the NML and other services throughout VIA's Quebec-Windsor Corridor – particularly the Southwestern Ontario services – this is going to require the funding and the will to recast the unsustainable VIA operation of today.

The objectives of a long-range VIA system plan, of which the NML should be a part, include:

- Acquisition of high-performance, bi-level trains capable of a 100-mph service and ultimately usable at up to 125 mph;
- Phased frequency increases justified by the reduced costs and increased ridership generated by this new equipment;
- A more equitable costing arrangement with the freight railways for access to their lines, plus reasonable priority for VIA's passenger trains;
- Greater interaction by VIA with the communities along the NML and the many businesses with which it can partner to their mutual benefit;
- An innovative, informed and enthusiastic VIA management team, supported by a board not appointed solely based on each director's political affiliation; and
- A *VIA Rail Canada Act* to pull it all together.

These are all matters that will be the responsibility of the next federal government, which will have to provide more enlightened stewardship than previous governments and deal with VIA in a much more positive and realistic manner.

Short-term improvements are possible on the NML, as well as many other VIA routes. The decision to embark on such a course of action will fall to Canada's next federal government.