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Support for Motion to Expand VIA Rail Canada's Toronto-St. Catharines-Niagara Falls Service

Dear Mayor Sendzik and Members of St. Catharines City Council:

Transport Action Ontario wishes to express its support for the motion by Councillor Bruce Williamson to urge VIA Rail Canada and the federal government to expand the intercity rail passenger service now provided on VIA's Toronto-St. Catharines-Niagara Falls route.

Transport Action Ontario is a citizens' advocacy group that has studied and promoted improvements in public transportation province-wide for 40 years. One of its prime areas of interest has always been the service provided by federally-funded VIA Rail. On several occasions recently, Transport Action Ontario has advocated improvements to the Niagara route as part of a high-performance rail upgrading program for VIA's Quebec-Windsor Corridor network.

In Transport Action Ontario's view, there are several valid reasons for calling on VIA and the federal government to improve rail service in Niagara.

Meeting Two Different Market Needs

At the outset, it should be established that Transport Action Ontario does not view improved VIA service to St. Catharines and other communities in Niagara as a replacement for the much-anticipated all-day GO Transit rail service.

Rather, an expanded VIA service would complement GO's future rail operation in Niagara. In concert, they would offer a highly-effective alternative to the growing congestion experienced on the QEW. This two-tiered rail service would also be of considerable benefit to those residents and visitors to the region who do not or choose not to drive.

The 2011 Metrolinx study of GO expansion in Niagara established that the region requires two types of rail passenger service. The first is a direct connection to and from the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA). The second is effective service within Niagara that is geared more to meeting local needs.

VIA is best suited to meeting the first need. The type of express service it can provide would be more attractive than GO for passengers travelling the full distance to and from Toronto.

On the other hand, GO is much better suited for travel within Niagara, having the ability to offer frequent bi-directional service to more stations. Such a commuter-oriented service would also have the ability to connect VIA's express service through coordinated scheduling, fare integration and the sharing of station facilities at interchange points.

This is not a question of VIA versus GO. Both services are required.

This approach is taken on several U.S. rail corridors similar to the Toronto-Niagara Falls route, where Amtrak provides the longer-haul service and various commuter agencies similar to GO deliver the service geared to intra-regional needs. In these cases, Amtrak and the local commuter agencies work cooperatively to provide the two levels of service in a coordinated fashion.

VIA did, in fact, partially meet this longer-haul need with one of the two daily roundtrips it operated until October 2012. This was the train that departed St. Catharines at 6:47 a.m. and returned from Toronto at 5:45 p.m. That train's journey time from St. Catharines to Toronto was approximately 95 minutes. Unfortunately, that service was discontinued as a result of a government-imposed budget cut at VIA.

In addition to providing a schedule that made it possible for Niagara residents to conveniently commute to and from Toronto, the discontinued VIA service also offered a higher level of passenger comfort than can be provided by GO. This is due to the differences in the equipment employed by the two rail operators. VIA's intercity rolling stock is more spacious, comfortable and better suited to a journey of this length than GO's commuter coaches, which are designed to accommodate large passenger loads over shorter distances.

If one of the objectives of Niagara's future rail service is to lure travellers off the QEW, then the issue of passenger comfort must be considered alongside its frequency, scheduling and journey times. The fast running time and comfortable accommodations provided by VIA make it the preferred means of attracting longer-haul passengers to public transportation and off the highways.

The expansion of VIA service in Niagara wouldn't have to be large to have a significant impact. If it initially consisted of no more than the restoration of the morning-in/afternoon-out train that was dropped in 2012, this would be an excellent first step in providing an attractive and more useful travel option for Niagara residents. It would double today's single-train service and once again allow for day-return trips to Toronto.

The incremental addition of more VIA roundtrip frequencies would be even more effective in meeting the needs of many who need to travel in either direction between Niagara and the GTA, whether those trips are taken for business, education, health care, leisure or tourism-related activities.

Broadening Niagara's Inter-Regional Connectivity

As the Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce (GNCC) has pointed out in its submission supporting Councillor Williamson's motion, Niagara needs better public transportation connectivity with the economic mega-region that encircles the Great Lakes. An expanded VIA Niagara service can greatly assist in making that connection.

One of the roles played by the VIA train that was discontinued in 2012 was as a connector to several other VIA trains serving various routes within the Quebec-Windsor Corridor. It provided a convenient link for passengers from Niagara who wished to travel to and from London, Windsor, Ottawa, Montreal and numerous other points in the corridor. These connections were lost when that train was discontinued.

Today, VIA is making modest but worthwhile improvements to some of the main routes within the Quebec-Windsor Corridor, which is home to more than half of Canada's population. VIA's intention is to go much further in building up its corridor operation and it will be making that case to the new federal government. To be a part of this expansion, Niagara requires a direct connection to these improved VIA services. This would help to make Niagara a decisive and well-connected part of the corridor, not an underserved adjunct to it.

As the GNCC's submission makes clear, also to be considered is the desirability and the long-term impact of expanded cross-border rail service. Major improvements to many Amtrak routes are now under way or in advanced planning. The result will ultimately be faster and more frequent service on several corridors, including several within the American portion of the Great Lakes mega-region. One of those to be improved and expanded is the New York City-Niagara Falls, NY, Empire Corridor.

The Empire Corridor is at the core of the working relationship VIA already enjoys with Amtrak. The remaining train on the Toronto-Niagara Falls route is, in fact, a Toronto extension of this emerging higher-speed corridor. Known as the *Maple Leaf*, it is operated jointly by VIA and Amtrak, with VIA being responsible for the Canadian portion of its run. VIA also provides terminal services at Montreal and Vancouver for other Amtrak cross-border trains.

With this established relationship, VIA is the ideal agency to work with Amtrak to improve Niagara's connection with the growing rail passenger system that serves numerous points on the American side of the Great Lakes.

Faster VIA Implementation

Transport Action Ontario believes the expansion of VIA service can be implemented relatively quickly and can proceed in advance of the GO expansion plan. The required station facilities for additional VIA services are already in place, continuing to be employed for the Toronto-Niagara Falls-New York City *Maple Leaf*. These would be shared with any additional VIA trains on the route and would not require modification or expansion.

It is true that any high-frequency passenger service on the Hamilton-Niagara Falls portion of the route – whether VIA, GO or both – will require large capital improvements to increase track capacity, eliminate traffic bottlenecks and prevent delays. However, adding a limited number of VIA trains will not come with such a requirement.

At a minimum, there is existing line capacity to restore the VIA roundtrip frequency that was discontinued in 2012. To what extent VIA can expand further without larger, time-consuming infrastructure projects is a matter that requires investigation by the federal government and VIA, in conjunction with GO and CN, which each own portions of the Toronto-Niagara Falls route.

It should be noted that GO is now undertaking an infrastructure project that will benefit an expanded VIA service for Niagara. In 2017, GO will be extending its weekday rail service east from Hamilton's West Harbour station to the new Confederation station at Centennial Parkway. This requires track and signal work in the Hamilton area to provide for higher train speeds and to eliminate potential conflicts with CN freight traffic. VIA will be a beneficiary of this GO-funded infrastructure improvement.

As for the required motive power and rolling stock, VIA currently has enough equipment to accommodate a moderate level of expansion. When VIA discontinued its second Toronto-Niagara Falls frequency in 2012, the corporation was short of equipment due to a multi-year refurbishment project that was running behind schedule. This project is nearing completion and VIA now has more equipment available for service expansion.

This contrasts with GO's current situation. The 2015 study of GO expansion that was commissioned by the municipalities and Niagara Region revealed that GO's fleet is currently stretched to the limit to meet demand elsewhere. While that study called for the purchase of some GO-style coaches that were then being offered for sale by the Los Angeles commuter rail authority, those cars have since been sold to the San Francisco commuter rail system and are no longer available.

By maximizing its available equipment and the rail infrastructure to which it has access, VIA appears positioned to deliver improved service to Niagara sooner than GO. As previously mentioned, that improved VIA service can continue to deliver benefits to the region when all-day GO rail service is implemented at a later date, which has yet to be determined.

Positive Political Factors

The election of a new federal government in October 2015 should be regarded as a positive factor in favour of the case for improved VIA service in Niagara. In the past, key members of this government have spoken in support of an expanded and improved VIA system. While no commitments or policy statements have yet been made, Transport Action Ontario's impression is that this government will look more positively on suggestions to improve VIA than did its predecessor, which was responsible for the service reduction in 2012.

A consideration for the new government in setting a future course for VIA is its potential role in combatting climate change, which this government has made a priority. Modern rail passenger service is not only energy efficient, it also produces fewer greenhouse gas emissions on a per-passenger-kilometre basis than car and air travel. The environmental advantages of making greater use of rail passenger service will not be lost on a government that has adopted an ambitious agenda to address climate change.

Also to be considered is the new government's infrastructure investment strategy, which is designed to bolster Canada's economy now and into the future. While it is believed that VIA's Niagara service can be expanded at little cost to the federal government, any required capital or operating funding would produce a high level of economic stimulus. Using the formula developed by the U.S. Department of Commerce, federal investment in VIA expansion would produce benefits three to four times larger the capital required.

VIA expansion in Niagara and elsewhere has the ability to assist the new government in realizing several of its economic, environmental and social goals. That it can yield numerous benefits relatively quickly by maximizing the use of existing federally-owned assets that are entrusted to VIA, such as its fleet and station properties, will be a point in its favour.

Conclusion

For all of the reasons outlined above, Transport Action Ontario believes the time is right to ask the federal government and VIA to investigate the practicality, the requirements and the benefits of expanded VIA service in Niagara. Such a request will cost the City of St. Catharines nothing. However, it could result in a federally-funded undertaking that will deliver major benefits to your city and the entire Niagara Region.

Accordingly, Transport Action Ontario respectfully urges the members of St. Catharines City Council to support Councillor Williamson's motion.

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