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By GREG GORMICK

What is SouthwestLynx?

Quite simply, it is a plan Oxford County commissioned me to produce to demonstrate how the overlapping and inadequate VIA Rail Canada and GO Transit services into Southwestern Ontario can and should be incrementally upgraded to high-performance rail standards. It includes new trains to increase comfort and reduce costs, track improvements to increase speeds and cut trip times, and capacity expansion to handle more passenger trains and simultaneously improve freight service.

Just as important as the rail improvements, which will use proven technologies and techniques, will be extending the Lynx's reach, ridership and revenue with Lynx Cub bus and van connections to communities without rail service, some of which no longer even have tracks.

Everything in this affordable, seamless and new-to-Canada intercity travel approach is based on successful U.S. examples, which mimic dozens of working examples in Europe, Asia and elsewhere. The Lynx is to intercity travel what the Toronto Transit Commission and GO are to urban and regional transit. More than just hardware, it is highly dependent on new methods of financing and governance to join all levels of government in cooperative funding, planning and service delivery. This would flatten such wasteful situations as the competition between VIA and GO on key route segments, such as the Toronto-Kitchener portion of VIA's North Main Line service through St. Marys to London.



A new high-performance passenger locomotive arrives at Los Angeles on one of the numerous high-performance trains that service the Golden State today. Photo courtesy of Amtrak

The ultimate Lynx key is a new governance model based on the one employed in California for its three intrastate rail corridors, as well as numerous transit and other publicly-funded programs. It will entrust long-range planning and day-to-day management to regional and municipal officials appointed by the federal and provincial funding partners to the Lynx board. They will have the power to hire rail-experienced staff and contract with various suppliers, including VIA and GO. The board will have the powers and resources to guide the Lynx from a more locally-responsive perspective.

Since delivering my SouthwestLynx plan, there have been developments that increase its chance of success. The first is the commissioning of a Lynx plan for the All Aboard Northern Ontario citizens' advocacy group, which is affiliated with ours in St. Marys. Founded by North Bay journalist Eric Boutilier, and modelled after and assisted by All Aboard St. Marys, its primary objective is the revival of Ontario Northland's Toronto-North Bay-Cochrane passenger train, the *Northlander*, which was cancelled by Dalton McGuinty's government in 2012. I'm flattered that Eric chose to have me adapt my Lynx concept to his region's needs and conditions.

As a result, the NortheastLynx and SouthwestLynx Phase I plans – the latter commissioned by All Aboard St. Marys – will soon move forward in unison for presentation to the public and all levels of governments. If adopted, this concept and its various common elements can next be applied on other Ontario routes and elsewhere in Canada.

Unlike past efforts in rail passenger advocacy, we now have a government at Queen's Park that has already expressed high-level interest in the Lynx concept. Much more needs to be done to explain and solicit political endorsements, but we have the happy advantage of dealing with a government that has been very welcoming of our efforts, unlike the previous one. The federal government-of-the-day still remains disinterested, but a strategy for dealing with this temporary road block has been crafted by both All Aboard committees.

In the end, a failure to adopt, feed and exercise our Lynx properly would be a tragic mistake by our elected officials. The concept is already hard at work on all those high-performance rail passenger corridors across the U.S. – and more will soon be rolling. Each one puts the regions they serve further ahead of us economically, socially and environmentally.

As I wrote in the opening of my first Lynx plan, "Access + mobility = destiny."

Only two questions remain: Who is aboard our Lynx for that trip to destiny? Are you?

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