



Backgrounder – Petition to Save VIA Rail

January 22, 2024

The House of Commons petition text and details can be found at:

<https://www.ourcommons.ca/petitions/en/Petition/Details?Petition=e-4754>

VIA Rail's Long-Distance Fleet

VIA Rail's long-distance and remote service fleet is primarily comprised of stainless-steel cars purchased by Canadian Pacific in 1955 and overhauled in 1990 to install electric heat. The balance are mild-steel *Renaissance* cars, acquired second-hand from the United Kingdom in 2001, which have not proved as durable and are also life-expired, with the majority of those cars already withdrawn from service.

Following an engineering report in fall 2022, VIA Rail had to place unoccupied buffer cars at the ends of stainless-steel trains for several months until structural integrity testing could be completed on the heritage equipment. Several cars had to be destroyed in the testing process to confirm the fleet's continued safety, subject to additional repairs, for operation until the early 2030s.

VIA Rail's Mandate

Although it is government owned, VIA Rail is a rather unique agency that operates largely at the discretion of the federal Transport Minister, a product of its hasty creation in the 70s. This means that routes can be, and have been, cut without debate in the House of Commons, and that it is not as accountable to the public as a typical arm's length Crown Corporation would be, nor as Amtrak is in the United States. This impairs the corporation's ability to efficiently plan for the long term and to invest in improving its services to meet growing ridership demand.

Outsourcing of the Quebec-Windsor Corridor

The High Frequency Rail (HFR) project, currently in procurement, now envisions that in addition to the construction of new infrastructure, passenger rail in the entire Quebec-Windsor corridor will be operated and maintained by a private corporation. This raises concerns about the loss of Canadian rail expertise, loss of public accountability, and about the future viability of the remaining VIA Rail operations which currently share resources and are cross-subsidized by revenues from the Quebec-Windsor Corridor. (See also <https://www.transportaction.ca/topics/intercity-rail-and-bus/high-frequency-rail-has-grown-into-a-megaproject-can-it-succeed-as-one/>)

Legislation

NDP MP and Transportation Critic Taylor Bachrach has tabled a private member's bill, the "Rail Passenger Priority Act" C-371 which aims to restore right of way for passenger trains, requiring the freight railways that VIA primarily operates on to run passenger trains on time or risk a fine of up to \$250,000. The MP is the petition's sponsor, and recently made headlines by taking a VIA train home to BC for the holidays, promoting his bill and engaging with passengers and crew of VIA Rail.



A comprehensive bill, C-640 (41-2) the “VIA Rail Canada Act” was tabled in 2014 by NDP MP Philip Toone. That bill, supported by Liberals, NDP, Greens, and Bloc Quebecois at the time, sought to solidify VIA Rail’s operating framework by officially incorporating it as an official Crown Corporation, give passenger trains priority over freight as well as give passenger railways greater abilities to negotiate with freight rail operators regarding track usage, scheduling, electrification, and more. Green Party MP Elizabeth May has also tabled Bill C-236 to retitle the corporation from VIA Rail Canada Inc. to VIA Rail Canada, along with other minor tweaks to VIA Rail’s governance.

About Transport Action Canada

Transport Action Canada is the national body of Transport Action, a citizen-based sustainable transportation advocacy group. We advocate for safe, efficient, and clean passenger transportation across Canada. Our regional groups include the Atlantic region, Ontario, the Prairies, and B.C.

Transport Action will continue to advocate for the passengers and communities VIA Rail serves, as well as for the expansion of passenger rail and motorcoach services in Canada as a vehicle for sustainability, equity, and decarbonization; including the creation of a *passenger bill of rights* to ensure all passengers are treated fairly across all modes of transportation and when making connecting journeys that use multiple modes. More information can be found at www.transportaction.ca

Requests for comment can be sent to info@transportaction.ca or 613-594-3290.