



Editorial section



Gilles Gagné

Commentary

A high-speed train must be backed by regional trains

On October 28, Radio-Canada leaked information indicating that the Canadian government is about to announce that it will finally opt for a high-speed train between Quebec City and Toronto, instead of the high-frequency train announced in the summer of 2023.

The high-frequency train was following a previous decision to pursue a high-speed train, following decades of back and forth about how the country would deal with train transport. Two steps forward were then frequently followed by two steps back, sometimes three or four steps back, as a country standing still, is, in fact, backing up.

Canada is the only country of the seven most industrialized countries, the G7, that functions without a high-speed train. The word "functions" is exaggerated as far as moving people is concerned. We get by, mostly leaving commuting between cities and between regions to individual initiatives, which means individual vehicles.

The result is appalling, environmentally-speaking. The number of cars, sports utility vehicles and pickup trucks that never roll on a dirty road is increasing faster than the population in certain areas. The country and the provinces are therefore repeatedly missing their greenhouse emission targets.

Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent, sometimes wasted, over the last 40 years to assess either a high-speed train or a high-frequency train. Not a single kilometre of track has been laid in that file. Consultants are cashing in impressive sums of money and potential riders are buying more cars.

In the meantime, Canadian National Rail, privatized in 1995 by the federal government, is laughing at VIA Rail, a public transporter that must use freight lines to move people without counting on a priority right for its passengers. CN is consequently laughing at the government and at Canadians.

Successive governments in Ottawa must find this situation normal, because nobody has moved since the creation of VIA Rail in 1977 to change the prior-

ity of freight over people.

The project is likely ill-fated

The high-speed train will likely be announced at one point in November, probably by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. The leak that favoured Radio-Canada, news-wise, was probably well-planned, as there was undoubtedly a strategy to stop the Liberal Party slide in surveys as soon as possible.

The Conservative Party leader, Pierre Poilievre, a major partisan of automobile use, is however not very keen on a project that could cost a fortune. This is an understatement. In fact, he has so far shown little enthusiasm for certain transportation projects that are already at a more advanced stage. For example, his government would not invest "one cent of federal money" in a tramway project in Quebec City.

It is almost certain that a government led by Pierre Poilievre will axe, again, a high-speed train.

The bill for such a train will be humongous, at an interval between \$80 billion and \$120 billion, according to most experts. This factor feeds the arguments of Pierre Poilievre.

However, at one point in the not-so-distant future, moving people efficiently will become a must for so-called "modern" countries, as efforts to reduce pollution will become compulsory. By then, the cost of building a high-speed train, or at least of offering a decent service to the population, will have become compulsory, and more prohibitive.

In mid-October, Canada's Transport Minister Anita Anand started preparing the media ground by assuring that Ottawa would "move forward", cautiously mentioning a "high-frequency, high-speed train." A day after Radio-Canada's October 28 leak, she pointed out that "the options available to us are extremely exciting," refusing to go any further.

In the meantime, in the Gaspé Peninsula...

The comments of Minister Anand come almost a year to the day after a November 1, 2023 meeting that regrouped the president of VIA Rail, Mario Pélouquin, two of his assistants and representatives of the Coalition of Gaspésians for the Return of the Passenger Train.

During that meeting, Mr. Pélouquin committed to coming to the Gaspé Peninsula at the end of January or the beginning of February 2024, and meet some stakeholders and further discuss the needs of the population.

Well, a year later, we are still waiting for the president of VIA Rail visit. It is hard to believe that in a full year, he hasn't found the time to come to the Gaspé Peninsula, where that public corporation's service has been suspended for 11 years.

Mario Pélouquin is not managing a corporation that runs over hundreds of routes daily. He is administering, with a large team, a network of tens of routes, in the lower tens, and less than 100 daily departures.

He could have coupled his flight - as VIA Rail's schedule is so depleted that a VIA Rail president rarely travels by train - with a visit to Moncton or Halifax, cities that also suffer from the transporter's shortcomings. About 2 million people live in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, yet only three weekly trains link that part of the country to Central Canada.

The Gaspé Peninsula track has always been serviceable between Matapédia and New Richmond. Since 2020, the Cascapédia-Saint-Jules bridges that seemed to scare VIA Rail's management have been replaced by brand new structures.

A few days or weeks down the road, the line will be serviceable to New Carlisle and Port Daniel before the summer of 2025.

Goodwill commends VIA Rail to resume its service to New Carlisle, considering the negligible impact it would have on its budget, and given that over the last 11 years, the corporation has used the Gaspé Peninsula money to offer services elsewhere. The only service provided to Gaspésians on their territory is a stop at the Matapédia station, where there is no agent.

The Matapédia-New Carlisle service must be reinstated before the next federal election, which will likely take place at the end of the spring or over the fall of 2025. It would then be more embarrassing for a Conservative Party government to axe it.

A year ago, despite making promising statements about the service resumption in the Gaspé Peninsula, Mario Pélouquin was also quick to point out the factors that could delay the return of the passenger train. In the pure tradition of VIA Rail, the hurdles seemed enormous, while a touch of imagination can make them disappear.

The VIA president was worried about the shortage of rolling stock, recruiting staff, the safety of the line and the state of the stations. What has he done over the last year to solve those problems?

If he can't find solutions, he should ask Gaspésians. They are faster than him at solving problems. A passenger train could be back by the second quarter of 2025, if not before, with a touch of common sense.