Government continues to ignore need for rail passenger services
Passenger rail not included as part of the province's solution to Northern Ontario's transportation challenges

The Ministry of Transportation (MTO) and the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines (MNDM) recently published a Multimodal Transportation Strategy (NOMTS) discussion paper with regard to the movement of people and goods in Northern Ontario for the next quarter century. While the draft report elaborates on the merits of highway, air, marine and freight rail transportation, the provincial government continues to ignore the role that passenger trains can provide to residents of this region.

The government does little more than to acknowledge that passenger rail services are limited in Northern Ontario. It indicates in Chapter 3 (Intercommunity Bus and Rail) that only one large urban community (above 10,000 residents) benefits from year round access to passenger rail services, Greater Sudbury. Furthermore, the government fails to recognize in its section of Emerging Strategic Directions to Consider (Chapter 7) the value that passenger trains can provide for residents in the region.

In their twenty five year Multimodal Transportation Strategy, the MTO and MNDM provide one ambiguous remark about protecting rail lines for the future use of passenger trains:

Rail Where Feasible

“Protect for future passenger rail where infrastructure exists, particularly where factors such as poor bus and/or road access exists, contributing to its potential need.”

Is this truly the absolute best the provincial government can do for Northerners?

Elected officials are not providing people and their families in Ontario’s North, especially seniors and students, with safe, comfortable, and reliable transportation options that they need to travel great distances. People suffering from injuries or illness are obligated to catch a bus on the side of the road to access the medical attention they require in larger cities. As passenger rail infrastructure sits idle, residents with limited mobility are forced to make other arrangements to travel in comfort and dignity.

The Government of Ontario invests heavily in public transportation in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). GO Transit benefits annually from a $155.62 subsidy from every man, woman and child residing in Ontario. Meanwhile, the province refuses, for a fourth consecutive year, to invest the 86 cents it provided for the operation of the former Northlander service (between Cochrane, North Bay and Toronto). Residents and First Nations along the Algoma Central corridor (between Sault-Ste-Marie, Hawk Junction and Hearst) have been stranded for over a year because of the provincial and federal governments’ refusal to intervene and provide basic transportation services in this region (at an annual cost of 7 cents for every Canadian resident).

This is intolerable and unacceptable. Northerners deserve better.

Over the last few weeks, the province held a number of consultations in six communities in Northern Ontario, including Greater Sudbury, Kenora, North Bay, Sault-Ste-Marie, Thunder Bay and Timmins. More than 70 participants in Sault-Ste-Marie provided input about the need for frequent, reliable and affordable passenger train services in the region. NEORN calls on residents and stakeholders to leave their remarks about the need for passenger rail service to be included in the Multimodal Transportation Strategy for Northern Ontario. Comments can be provided here before the deadline of December 16, 2016:

Link to discussion paper online: https://nomts.ca/discussion-paper/ Email: contact@nomts.ca Telephone: 1-844-505-5006

Mailing address:
Northern Ontario Multimodal Transportation Study
c/o Ministry of Northern Development and Mines
Suite 200, 70 Foster Drive, Sault-Ste-Marie (ON), P6A 6V8

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Comments provided in the North Bay Nugget article on NOMTS of November 16, 2016
http://www.nugget.ca/2016/11/16/ministries-collecting-input-for-multimodal-transportation-strategy-for-northern-ontario

Corina Moore, President & CEO of Ontario Northland
“You can’t look at it without looking at passenger rail. The North is different from the south. It has a different climate, larger distances. And so all modes must meet the needs of Northern Ontarians.”

June Kingshott
“We’re all interested in having the Ontario Northland back. The (passenger) rail service was replaced with the bus . . . But you can’t get up and walk around on the bus. People with mobility issues really can’t use the bus.”

Jim McCuaig
“We need good, reliable service for that, something that is not restricted by weather conditions … or construction. The train is also more environmentally friendly than the bus, and it meets the special needs of travellers”

Linda Acton-Riddle
“The rail gives us some options. If the road is closed because of weather, the train can still get through. As you age, you need other options. Some people are motion sensitive. They can’t use the bus. But they seem to be all right on the train.”

Comments received on the NEORN and affiliate Facebook feeds

Diane Duquette:  “There were no “additional” buses added to replace the train. The train was not replaced.”

Nancy Schlievert Packham:  “As a matter of fact, bus service decreased in many communities.”

Tom Vaughan:  “Fantastic to hear that the right messages are being said loud and clear!! Now, they may be getting heard, but will the government actually listen? And act?”

Isabelle Mills:  “Please, we need the northlander!”

Norma Knight:  “Yes please bring the Northlander back”

Ann Paterson Wallace:  “Yes, bring back the Northlander.”

Janet Mallett-Doug Spencer:  “PLEASE”

ABOUT THE NORTHERN & EASTERN ONTARIO RAIL NETWORK

The Northern & Eastern Ontario Rail Network (NEORN) is a grass roots organization advocating for the retention of existing rail corridors and the reinstatement of passenger train and corresponding shuttle services throughout the Districts of Algoma, Cochrane, Greater Sudbury, Kenora, Manitoulin, Muskoka, Nipissing, Parry Sound, Rainy River, Sudbury, Thunder Bay and Timiskaming.

Northern Ontario has a network of approximately 6,000 kilometres of rail interlinking a significant portion of municipalities & First Nations throughout the region. There are many economic, environmental, practical, social and health factors that contribute to the importance of providing frequent & reliable passenger train service for communities, businesses & visitors looking to explore & travel great distances throughout the Cambrian Shield. NEORN is actively attempting to demonstrate to the provincial & federal governments the need for publicly supported investments in this endeavour, as is the case in every other jurisdiction in Canada.

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“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” — Margaret Mead