



Council of Senior Citizens' Organizations of BC

Representing seniors in British Columbia since 1950

www.coscobc.org

18 February 2024

The Hon. Chrystia Freeland, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance
Department of Finance Canada
90 Elgin Street
Ottawa (Ontario) K1A 0G5
By email: chrystia.freeland@fin.gc.ca

The Hon. Pablo Rodrigues, Minister of Transport
Government of Canada
330 Sparks Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0N5
By email: TC.MinisterofTransport-MinistredesTransports.TC@tc.gc.ca

Dear Ministers Freeland and Rodriguez

Re: Need to modernize VIA Rail's Equipment and Operating Environment

I am writing to express the support of the Council of Senior Citizens' Organizations of BC (COSCO) for the modernization of VIA Rail's equipment and operating environment, in particular VIA's long-distance, remote and regional (LDRR) rail fleet. Formed in 1950, COSCO represents 80,000 members of our 75 affiliated seniors' organizations who come from all parts of British Columbia. We are a non-partisan, non-profit, independent organization which promotes and advances the well-being of Seniors in BC.

COSCO supports the accepted arguments for railway revitalization including energy efficient transport and environmental protection. In addition, our membership has unique needs that can be met by modernization of VIA's operations. Due to health or financial position, many members no longer own and drive cars, and often depend on public transportation to travel to medical and other appointments which may be several hours or more from their homes. With airlines and intercity bus companies cutting services, a revitalized VIA service is crucial to serve remote and Indigenous communities in all parts of British Columbia.

Stable VIA Rail Funding

Since 1977 when VIA Rail was formed as a crown corporation to relieve CP and CN of their obligations to provide passenger service, it has been underfunded. VIA is now experiencing a strong post-COVID recovery in ridership. The corporation has requested a stable operating fund of \$400 million per year for the next five years. This request should be

President • Leslie Gaudette • 604-630-4201 • pres@coscobc.org
PO Box 26036, RPO Langley Mall, Langley, BC, V3A 8J2

granted as it will facilitate a return to daily western transcontinental service amongst other restored services.

COSCO requests the following investments in rail passenger operations relevant to British Columbia.

Replacement of long-distance fleet

VIA's existing passenger coaches operating in BC are the stainless-steel units built in 1955, making them older than many of our members. These VIA coaches have been patched up and returned to service numerous times. As early as 2032, some coaches will no longer meet the minimum required engineering standards and must be retired from service. Many of our members face mobility challenges that make travelling on VIA's existing equipment difficult or impossible. The new fleet is required simply to meet modern day accessibility standards.

Given the estimated 10-year production time, failure to make the investment decision in the coming year will put long distance operations at risk. This would spell the end of the transcontinental "Canadian" and "Skeena" service between Prince Rupert and Jasper. The new order should be for enough long-distance equipment to operate a full schedule on all routes. VIA submitted a business case for this investment two years ago. It is well past the time to place that order.

The Vancouver Island Railway

The population of Vancouver Island has exploded in recent years. The existing highway network with its natural hazards is struggling to meet traffic demands. Utilizing the old E&N corridor makes much more sense than constructing new highways. The Canadian and British Columbian governments have developed a reconciliation first approach to developing this corridor. The cost estimates have been prepared for this work and should be approved now.

Vancouver to Prince George

BC Rail passenger service on this route was discontinued in 2002 and the operation was later sold to CN. The province of BC still owns the railway with several passenger services now operating over it through agreements with CN. The Koaham Shuttle is a rail bus connecting Seaton Portage with Lillooet operated jointly by the Seton Lake First Nation and CN. The popular Rocky Mountaineer operates a schedule over the line between North Vancouver and Prince George. From there the tourist train goes to Jasper. These train runs "closed door," providing no passenger service along the line.

VIA Rail should be mandated and financed to explore the possibilities of a passenger service between Vancouver and Prince George. This service would serve Squamish and Whistler, thereby reducing pressure on the Sea-to-Sky Highway. It would also provide safe, convenient travel between Vancouver and our Northern Capital where further VIA and bus

President • Leslie Gaudette • 604-630-4201 • pres@coscobc.org
PO Box 26036, RPO Langley Mall, Langley, BC, V3A 8J2

connections are available. This service would no doubt offer very attractive circle tour possibilities.

Investment in Railway Infrastructure

A railway infrastructure fund should be established with representatives from the government of Canada and railway operators to improve railway infrastructure in Canada. In BC issues to be addressed would include the replacement of the obsolete New Westminster rail bridge and cross-border infrastructure for connections to the United States at Blaine. At the national level these funds would be used build more for double track and longer sidings to minimize conflict between freight and passenger schedules. The result would be faster, more attractive passenger schedules.

Conclusion

Canada's passenger rail system has been neglected for far too long. While most other countries in the world have developed fast, efficient, accessible systems we have fallen far behind. The time has come to invest in our rail passenger network or risk losing it forever.

COSCO urges you to embark on that renewal journey immediately.

Sincerely yours,

Leslie Gaudette

Leslie Gaudette
President

Tim Larsen

Tim Larsen on behalf of COSCO
Transportation Committee

Seamus O'Regan, Minister of Labour and Seniors,

MinistrePT-LPMinister@labour-travail.gc.ca

Mark Strahl, Shadow Minister for Transport: mark.strahl@parl.gc.ca

Taylor Bachrach, Federal NDP Transportation Critic: taylor.bachrach@parl.gc.ca

Elizabeth May, National Green Party Leader: elizabeth.may@parl.gc.ca

Xavier Barsalou-Duval, Bloc Québécois Critic for Transport, infrastructure and Communities, xavier.barsalou-duval@parl.gc.ca

Rob Fleming, BC Minister of Transportation: Minister.MOTI@gov.bc.ca

Harinder Sandhu, Parliamentary Secretary for Seniors and Long-Term Care,
Harwinder.sandhu.MLA@leg.bc.ca

Trevor Halford, BC United Transportation Critic: trevor.halford.MLA@leg.bc.ca

Sonia Furstenau, BC Green Party Leader sonia.furstenau.MLA@leg.bc.ca

Denis Boucher, Director, Government and Indigenous Relations, VIA Rail
Denis.Boucher@viarail.ca