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## Citizen rail advocates see CN takeover of SW Ontario line as trouble for VIA

As part of their observance of National Railway Day on November 7, the All Aboard St. Marys and All Aboard Northern Ontario citizens' rail action committees are advising politicians to closely watch Thursday's CN take-back of the Kitchener-London section of the Guelph Subdivision used by four of VIA Rail Canada's Southwestern Ontario trains.

"We'd like to see this as a plus," says All Aboard St. Marys team leader, Chris West. "But whenever we see VIA becoming even more dependent on CN for the efficient handling of its trains, the outcome is rarely positive for passengers or the taxpayers who help pay for those trains. CN has earned an industry-wide reputation as North America's most passenger-unfriendly freight railway."

The line segment is the CN-owned Guelph Subdivision, which has been leased to the Goderich-Exeter Railway of the Genesee & Wyoming (G&W) short line firm for 20 years. CN refused to renew the G&W lease on this line, as well as the connecting Fergus Subdivision from Guelph to Cambridge and the CN-owned yard and industrial lines in the Hamilton area. CN released no details about the take-back, but rumours swirl about CN using the single-track Guelph Subdivision as a freight relief route for its double-track line, also used by VIA, from London to Toronto via Burlington and Brampton.

Says Éric Boutilier, North Bay-based team leader of All Aboard Northern Ontario, "We have a ringside seat in the North for CN's treatment of passenger trains on single-track lines. My advice is to beware. CN's treatment of VIA's transcontinental *Canadian* has set an all-time low in passenger train reliability. Because the federal government took no action against CN's public-be-damned attitude, this resulted in VIA being forced to lengthen the already overly-long schedule of *The Canadian* and drop one of three weekly transcontinental trips of its flagship train during the summer 2019 peak tourism season."

Nationally-known rail analyst and policy adviser Greg Gormick – an adviser to both All Aboard groups – is in complete agreement with the concerns expressed by the two citizens' rail action committees. His clients have included VIA, CP, CN and politicians of four parties, and he has witnessed firsthand the deterioration since its 1995 privatization in the passenger attitude of CN, which has not been duplicated by CP.

"You only have to analyze the profile of the Guelph Sub to see what could easily happen," says Gormick. "It's a single-track line with a limited number of very short passing sidings. If CN runs its now-typical monster freight trains of 10,000 feet or more, I know whose short passenger trains are going to get put into the sidings to wait. That will further damage VIA's CN-dependent on-time performance."

As Gormick has documented in several rail passenger improvement reports, CN's deficient passenger service delivery isn't restricted to VIA. He points to Amtrak's congressionally-mandated host freight railway reports, which consistently rate CN as Amtrak's worst service provider and CP as its best.

<https://media.amtrak.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/CY2017-Report-Card-%E2%80%93-FAQ-%E2%80%93-Route-Details.pdf>

Gormick also points out that CP had an excellent record in deftly accommodating passenger trains before the Mulrone government hacked VIA in half in 1990 and axed most of its trains on CP lines. Regrettably, VIA's reduced system now uses CP for only 4% of its route mileage and CN for 83%.

"If formerly Crown-owned CN reformed its passenger-unfriendly ways, this situation could have a positive outcome for all – including CN shippers and shareholders," says West. "CN has been performing some overdue upgrading of the Kitchener-London section of the Guelph Subdivision, which could benefit VIA's Toronto-London and Toronto-Sarnia trains if they aren't routinely shoved into the sidings to give CN's freight trains priority. The track work could help reduce the ridiculously long schedules of VIA's four daily passenger trains and accommodate more in the near future."

VIA's Toronto-London running times have grown over the years from slightly under three hours in the 1960s to nearly three-and-a-half hours today, despite VIA and GO investing hundreds of millions to upgrade track and signals over portions of what is now called the Innovation Corridor.

Says Boutilier, "The solution has been demonstrated by Amtrak and its co-operative freight railway hosts in the U.S. CN needs to be compelled to honestly state what capacity expansion investment it requires to handle the passenger trains swiftly and reliably. No one expects CN to foot the full bill for this. But they won't even tell us just how much VIA would need to contribute to such a public-private partnership program, which tends to confirm our belief that they simply want Canada's passenger trains to go away."

These issues and more are being covered in two Ontario Lynx high-performance passenger train improvement plans Gormick has been commissioned to produce for the All Aboard committees. They are also part of the discussions he is having on the committees' behalf with independent, high-level officials in Ottawa and at Queen's Park. The public and their elected representatives will be advised of the outcome of this work in the near future.

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