

Two Questions that “Test” Passenger Rail Service Decisions Anywhere in Canada

Dr. Barry Wellar, MCIP

Professor Emeritus, University of Ottawa
Distinguished Research Fellow, Transport Action Canada
Policy and Research Advisor, Federation of Urban Neighbourhoods
Principal, Wellar Consulting Inc.



Comments on Supplementary Slides Prepared for the Town Hall Meeting

National Dream Renewed

Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, November 8, 2012

December 4, 2012

1. A Brief Note of Explanation about the Commentary

The two questions which are the basis of the commentary are included in the supplementary slides prepared for the National Dream Renewed Town Hall Meeting held in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, on November 8, 2012.

The meeting was co-sponsored by Transport Action Canada and the Coalition for Algoma Passenger Transportation (CAPT). I was asked to make the presentation on behalf of the National Dream Renewed Project.

Inquiries are being made about the supplementary slides by people who were not in attendance, and the slides are being made available through the CAPT website (http://captrains.ca/?page_id=2) and other means.

However, because the slides are designed to be elaborated during the presentation, they are terse and primarily serve as “talking points”.

As a result, simply sending out the package of PowerPoint slides may prompt more inquiries about both context and content.

The purpose of this post-meeting production, therefore, is to provide a brief explanation about the slides prepared specifically for the Sault Ste. Marie Town Hall Meeting, and about the two questions which I believe are pertinent for political, social, economic, financial, environmental, equity, and sustainability reasons to past, present, and future rail passenger decisions in Canada.

As for a more formal report, one is under consideration, but since it will not be completed in the near future this interim approach seems to be a practical and responsible way to put the supplementary slides into the public domain.

The final word of explanation is about the use of the word “test” in the title.

During my 30 years as a professor , I designed exam questions to separate A’s from B’s, B’s from C’s, C’s from D’s, D’s from E’s, and E’s from F’s.

Some things don’t change.

2. About Slides A, B, and C

These slides contain excerpts from the home page of Transport Canada, and outline the mandate, scope, and functions of the Transport, Infrastructure, and Communities Portfolio, which includes VIA Rail.

The materials from which the excerpts are derived can be viewed at <http://www.tc.gc.ca/eng/aboutus-abouttic.htm>.

As the reader may ascertain, other parts of the Portfolio description lend themselves to analysis and questioning along the lines illustrated by the comments in this production.

However, the selected excerpts are what I used to create the slides which supplement the NDR slides, and appear to be more than sufficient to establish the reasons behind the derivation and framing of the questions which are presented in Slide D and Slide E.

For the purposes of this production, therefore, I reproduce selected parts of the Transport Canada page which are directly relevant to the National Dream Renewed presentation that I gave on behalf of Transport Action Canada, and which also serve an important second function.

That is, in my opinion they are also relevant to discussions and interventions by CAPT and other groups regarding rail passenger services in Northern Ontario, and also have applicability to situations elsewhere in Canada. As attendees at NDR town hall meetings are aware, the NDR presentation is already packed with slides, and as a result creating several supplementary slides is a relatively easy way to tailor a few minutes of the town hall meeting to focus on the situation in a particular locale.

3. Slide A

The first slide excerpt is presented as Figure1.

Figure 1. Website Description of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, Government of Canada: Slide A

Within the Government of Canada, Minister Denis Lebel leads the Transport, Infrastructure and Communities (TIC) Portfolio. He is the Minister responsible for the activities of Transport Canada and Infrastructure Canada. The portfolio also includes the following:

- **11 Crown corporations [including VIA Rail]**
- **the Canadian Transportation Agency, the Transportation appeal Tribunal and the Ship-source Oil Pollution fund**
- **18 Port Authorities**
- **21 Airport Authorities, as well as shared governance organizations that include: i The Buffalo and Fort Erie Public Bridge Authority; ii NAV CANADA; iii. The St. Lawrence Seaway Management Corporation.**

Source: <http://www.tc.gc.ca/eng/aboutus-abouttic.htm>

4. Comment on Slide A

As illustrated by the excerpt and elaborated by the Transport Canada page, Transport, Infrastructure, and Communities (TIC) is a large agency which directly affects:

- Rail, water, air, and land transport services across Canada;
- The infrastructure supporting those transport services; and
- The impact on communities of the presence or absence of transport services and/or transport infrastructure.

VIA Rail, which is one of 11 crown corporations within the TIC Portfolio, is the crown corporation of primary interest to this production because VIA Rail has primary responsibility on behalf of the Government of Canada to provide rail passenger service at the national level.

In addition to numerous entries in the various drop-down menus, the Portfolio description also includes an organization chart which graphically depicts the relationships among crown corporations and other entities.

While it may appear to some readers that the design of the organization chart is from the “pre-systems era” and therefore out of touch with today’s realities, I believe it is a useful means for quickly appreciating the competition for attention and funds within the TIC Portfolio.

A point of concern to be briefly noted here, and discussed in considerable detail in the formal paper, is that the linear or “box-by-box” thinking which lies behind organization charts such as that depicted on the Transport Canada page may inadvertently misrepresent the many and complex relationships among the entities in an organization.

I wish to re-emphasize as a closing comment on Slide A, therefore, that there are many connections between VIA Rail and the other crown corporations and entities within the TIC Portfolio, and they are no doubt given their due policy, funding, etc., consideration by Committees of Cabinet, the Ministry of Transport, the Department of Finance, Treasury Board, the Auditor-General, and so on.

Further, to briefly expand on this theme, it is thoroughly documented that there are numerous relationships between the contents of the three bullets presented at the beginning of this section.

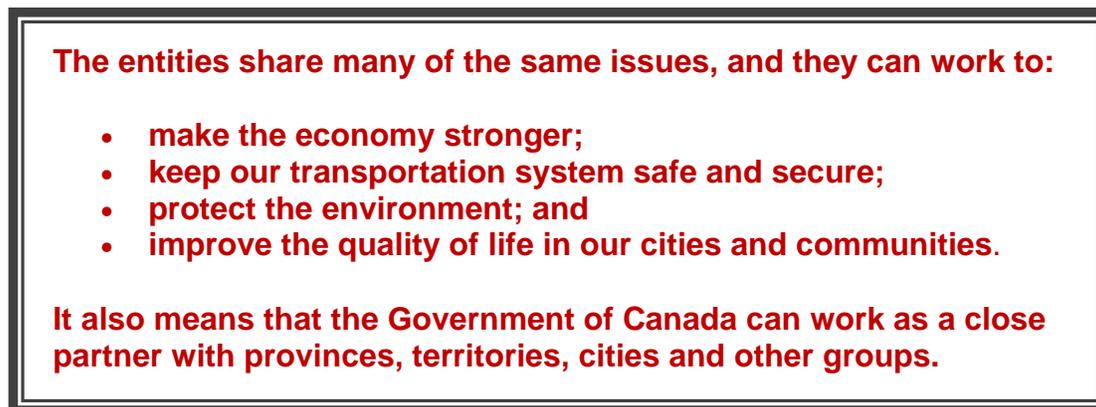
Nevertheless, on numerous occasions over the decades governments at all levels have forgotten those systems features, and the cost of the oversights or the errors in judgement have been high, and sometimes of a long-lasting nature.

As noted above, however, as concern-worthy as they may be, those connections and relationships were beyond the scope of the National Dream Renewed presentation which I gave in Sault Ste. Marie, and are outside the purview of this commentary on the supplementary slides.

5. Slide B

The second slide excerpt is presented as Figure 2.

Figure 2. Website Description of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, Government of Canada: Slide B



Source: <http://www.tc.gc.ca/eng/aboutus-abouttic.htm>

The section directly following the excerpt in Slide B could also have been presented as an excerpt, because it contains several declarations which are directly pertinent to the two questions which appear in Slide D and Slide E.

Further, without any prompting from me and probably because of the fact that the audience had done a lot of thinking about the rail passenger services issue, the contents of the Portfolio declarations were the subject of a number of questions and comments expressed before, during, and after my presentation at the National Dream Renewed Town Hall Meeting in Sault Ste. Marie.

However, due to presentation time constraints, the section was not excerpted.

Fortunately, the decision to prepare this commentary on the supplementary slides provides a timely opportunity to expand the TIC story, as follows.

- “This helps our economy. Shared projects and programs create or protect jobs, and help move people and products across the country and around the world.
- It protects our environment. More research into, support for and promotion of public transit (buses, trains, carpools) and fuel-efficient vehicles will make our air cleaner.
- It improves our quality of life. Shared projects that build and maintain safe and secure roads, bridges, ports, airports and railways, as well as community centres, and water and wastewater treatment plants, make life better.”

Source: <http://www.tc.gc.ca/eng/aboutus-abouttic.htm>

6. Comment on Slide B

At first and even second glance this part of the Portfolio description could be discounted as “bumph”, because the language may be deemed to be high-sounding but vague, bereft of measurable objectives, and contain no information as to how the agency’s goals are to be achieved.

However, I believe that upon inspection it may be found that each of the bullet points in the excerpt and the subsequent section of the TIC page represents a nationally significant research, policy, program, planning, development, and operations domain regarding past, present, and future rail passenger situations and decisions anywhere in Canada.

Moreover, combining two or more of the bulleted statements from either section of the TIC page yields even more significant research, policy, program, planning, development, and operations domains regarding past, present, and future rail passenger situations and decisions anywhere in Canada.

Finally, the mention in the closing sentence of working “as a close partner with provinces, territories, cities and other groups” could be taken as a promise that the TIC Portfolio, including VIA Rail, would welcome inputs from organizations such as Transport Action Canada, CAPT, and other public interest groups regarding past, present, and future rail passenger situations and decisions anywhere in Canada.

7. Slide C

The excerpt in Slide C is “the bottom line” of the TIC Portfolio page, and is presented as Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Transport, Infrastructure and Communities
Government of Canada: Slide C**

**Canadians know that these things are important. That is why the
Transportation, Infrastructure and Communities Portfolio works –
it improves where and how we work and live.**

Source: <http://www.tc.gc.ca/eng/aboutus-abouttic.htm>

8. Comment on Slide C

The excerpt in Slide C ends with the assertion that the Transport, Infrastructure and Communities Portfolio works because “it improves where and how we work and live”.

It struck me that the claim could be true, but due in part to my experience as a former Senior Research Officer, Information Theme Coordinator, Director of Non-Metropolitan

Community Development, and Senior Policy Advisor at the federal Ministry of State for Urban Affairs, it has long been first nature for me to be skeptical about federal agency statements regarding accomplishments.

In this case, skepticism about federal agency claims regarding rail transport had been reinforced over many years by numerous critical/negative comments in list serves to which I subscribe, as well by many of the entries in the large file that I had assembled over the years containing critical/negative media stories, government reports, public interest group reports, and other accounts about the past, present, and future state of rail passenger transport in Canada.

However, under the circumstances it appeared appropriate to set skepticism aside, and to give the agency a full and fair opportunity to demonstrate that it *Said what it meant, and meant what it said* with regard to the term “improves”.

Two questions were therefore designed to “test” the thinking behind the doing in regard to cutting passenger rail service on the one hand, and restoring, expanding, and enhancing rail passenger service on the other.

In both scenarios the minimum requirement for a passing grade is substantive, verifiable evidence which confirms the claim that whatever Transport Canada/VIA Rail does with regard to rail passenger service, “it improves where and how we work and live”.

9. About Slide D

Slide D arises from an apparent conflict of perceptions and/or facts. That is, on the one hand I had seen the claim (Slide C) that the Transport, Infrastructure and Communities Portfolio (including VIA Rail) works because “it improves where and how we [Canadians] work and live”,

On the other hand, however, I had seen numerous claims which were critical of decisions to cut rail service, and in particular to cut rail passenger service.

Sources of contrary claims include media stories from across Canada over many years, numerous list serve discussions, as well as statements and graphics in the National Dream Renewed slide production, and in *De-Railed: The National Dream* documentary by Dan Nystedt.

As the reader may be aware, cuts to rail passenger service in Canada have a long history, including the cutting of the Budd Rail Car service between Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury in 1977; that is, 35 years ago.

It therefore follows that since cuts to rail passenger service have occurred for at least 35 years, Transport Canada and VIA Rail would have at their disposal a very substantial, comprehensive body of longitudinal data as well as a number of analytical studies to validate the claim that TIC (including VIA Rail) “improves where and how we [Canadians] work and live.”

In the case of Slide D (Figure 5), the question which is posed seeks evidence that cutting rail passenger service improves where and how we (Canadians) work and live.

Figure 5. Question One that Arises from Examining TIC Portfolio Claims: Slide D

**How does cutting rail passenger service improve
where and how we work and live?**

This question prompted a considerable amount of sharp or edgy commentary during and after the NDR presentation in Sault Ste. Marie.

In the case of residents of Sault Ste. Marie and other municipalities along the Budd Rail Car line between Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury, they had and continue to have first-hand experience of how rail passenger cuts affect a community.

That is, and if I recall audience comments correctly, no one in the packed meeting room agreed that the loss of rail passenger service improved where and how residents of Sault Ste. Marie and other affected communities lived and worked back in 1977, or during the intervening 35 years.

Rather, it was universally (and sometimes angrily) argued that the loss of rail passenger service has had a long-lasting negative impact, and hence the importance which is attached to the work of CAPT to restore that service.

And, as a final comment on Question One, it has been brought to my attention a number of times since the Town Hall meeting that members of CAPT as well as other individuals along the rail corridor between Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury are anxiously awaiting an evidence-based response to Question One by the TIC Portfolio, including VIA Rail.

In section 11 several suggestions are offered that may contribute to obtaining, and disseminating, the explanations received about how cutting rail passenger improves where and how we work and live.

10. About Slide E

As the author of a number of reports beginning in the late 1960s on the topic of sustainability, and on such associated topics as energy supply and consumption, land supply and consumption, transport infrastructure material supply and consumption, and the design and application of quantitative methods and techniques to measure and evaluate the sustainability of alternative modes of transport, it occurred that there could be and should be a connection between the TIC claim of working to “improve where and how we [Canadians] work and live”, and a project on sustainable transport practices which I conducted in 2008 and 2009 for Transport Canada.

The study is titled ***Methodologies for Identifying and Ranking Sustainable Transport Practices in Urban Regions***, and the reports may be viewed at <http://www.wellar.ca/wellarconsulting/home.html>.

One of the points of connection between the TIC claim and the project undertaken for Transport Canada is the word “improve”. That is, given the frequent use of the terms sustainable and sustainability by each of the components of the TIC Portfolio, it logically follows that when any part of TIC uses the term “improve” it has high regard for sustainability-related variables, relationships, and measures.

It warrants being made explicit, however, that although sustainability is an important aspect of “improve” in regard to decisions about rail passenger service, it is only one of perhaps several dozen aspects of “improve” which are relevant to evaluating decisions about the past, present, and future state of rail passenger transport in Canada.

Further in that vein, a second point of connection is the matter of methodology: that is, what methodology does Transport Canada/VIA Rail use to decide whether a rail passenger decision is likely to improve where and how Canadians work and live?

Question Two (Figure 6) introduces a scenario which Transport Canada/VIA Rail could use to illustrate the methodology that is employed or would be employed to make decisions about restoring, expanding, and enhancing rail passenger services.

Figure 6. Question Two that Arises from Examining TIC Portfolio Claims: Slide E

How would restoring, expanding, and enhancing rail passenger service improve where and how we work and live?

There are a range of choices available to the TIC Portfolio and VIA Rail with regard to rail passenger decisions including: cut services; maintain current service levels; restore previous service levels; expand service levels; restore and expand service levels; restore and enhance service levels; expand and enhance service levels; and restore, expand, and enhance service levels.

I selected the restore, expand, and enhance service levels option for Question Two for several reasons.

First, this country has more than 150 years of experience with rail passenger service deliberations and decisions, and has been through each of the restore, expand, and enhance phases. Anything less than a question which combines all the phases would not do justice to the thinkers and doers who created and implemented *The National Dream*, and who were responsible for the nation-shaping and nation-building role played by railroads in general and passenger rail in particular.

Second, there appears to be a widespread and growing sense that Canadians are not sufficiently informed about the recent and present thinking behind the doing at the Transport, Infrastructure, and Communities Portfolio, including VIA Rail.

I suggest that a methodologically robust and evidence-based response to Question Two would go a long way towards demonstrating the expertise which the Transport, Infrastructure, and Communities Portfolio, including VIA Rail, brings to bear on rail passenger deliberations and decisions.

11. Concluding Comments

There are two primary purposes to the supplementary slides which I introduced at the National Dream Renewed Town Hall Meeting in Sault Ste. Marie, and they are part of an initiative to promote informed public dialogue and understanding with respect to the past, present, and future of rail passenger transport in Canada.

First, I designed the two questions to serve the interests of:

- a) Citizens and groups concerned about cuts to VIA Rail passenger service; and,
- b) Citizens and groups advocating a level of rail passenger service which is superior to that currently available.

Second, and equally important, it is intended that the questions be perceived as an opportunity for the Transport, Infrastructure and Communities Portfolio, including VIA Rail, to provide Canadians with comprehensive, evidence-based explanations for decisions affecting rail passenger service in Canada.

To move things along in a timely manner, I suggest that interested citizens and groups contact Mr. Denis Lebel, Minister of Transport Canada, Mr. Steven Fletcher, Minister of State for Transport, Mr. Marc Laliberté, President and Chief Executive Officer of VIA Rail, and members of the Via Rail Board of Directors, and ask for answers to the two questions.

Further, in the interests of rapid turnaround and easy dissemination of communications, I suggest that citizens use e-mail and explicitly request that all replies are via e-mail.

With regard to replies received, as well as non-replies for that matter, they are pertinent to the mission of promoting informed public dialogue and understanding with respect to the past, present, and future of rail passenger transport in Canada.

Specifically, the content of replies received could be very revealing about the assumptions, premises, motives, approaches, etc., that underlie rail passenger decisions, and could be very instructive in discussions with individual MPs and political parties about their positions on rail passenger services in Canada.

And, of course, responses from MPs and political parties are especially significant for Canadian citizens who want to know where MPs and political parties stand with regard to rail passenger service cuts, and/or a superior rail passenger service.

As for the non-responses, it is my experience that they speak volumes about elected and appointed public officials at any level of government who refuse to answer questions put to them by citizens.

In this case, I believe that non-replies to the questions in Slide D and Slide E could have various meanings, but two interpretations seem most likely:

- An MP, political party, or appointed official has no answer to a question; or,
- An MP, political party, or appointed official has an answer but for political reasons is refusing to make the answer known.

In either case, and regardless of the nature of the response, decisions to cut or to restore, expand, and enhance rail passenger service in Canada are matters of national interest for political, social, economic, financial, environmental, equity, and sustainability reasons.

I therefore suggest that replies be widely circulated, such as by postings on list serves and websites, and that a public interest group such as Transport Action Canada serve as a repository for communications based on either or both of the questions.

It is my perception that Canadians need to quickly become much better informed about their rail passenger service, and Internet-based information networking is an excellent, low-cost way to proceed.

Finally, this report draws on sources which will be supported by reference and bibliographic information in the formal publication. However, that document is on hold due to other commitments.

In the meantime, therefore, the interested reader is referred to the following websites for access to materials which contributed to this report: transport2000.ca; wellar.ca/wellarconsulting; slideshare.net; <http://urbanneighbourhoods.wordpress.com/>; <http://nd4on.ca/>; http://captrains.ca/?page_id=2; <http://www.tc.gc.ca/eng/menu.htm>; and, <http://www.viarail.ca/en/about-via-rail/our-company/board-directors>.

12. Addendum: Rail Passenger Images

The Internet contains many thousands of images associated with rail passenger services, routes, environs, infrastructure, riders, rolling stock, etc., and in due course I will launch a project to assemble images which graphically illustrate aspects of the two questions that are raised in this report:

**How does cutting rail passenger service improve
where and how we work and live?**

**How would restoring, expanding, and enhancing
rail passenger service improve
where and how we work and live?**

I hasten to add that I welcome participation in the images initiative, which I believe could be a very informative and useful enterprise extending across Canada and beyond. Readers/viewers interested in participating in the images initiative are invited to contact me at wellarb@uottawa.ca.

To complete this report, it occurred that it would be informative to include a small selection of images depicting thoughts, situations, activities, etc., which were instrumental in framing the two questions which were designed to supplement the National Dream Renewed presentation in Sault Ste. Marie.

**A Selection of Images Behind the
Rail Passenger Service Questions**



Two Questions that “Test” Passenger Rail Service Decisions Anywhere in Canada



Image Copyright © Scott Barr

RailcarPhotos.com

