

Rail Passenger Consequences

The Gaspé situation underscores a problem that is having serious consequences for Canadian rail passenger service. In addition to the suspended Matapédia-Gaspé route, VIA operates three other services in whole or in part over short line railways. These are:

- Toronto-London North Main Line service on the CN line that is leased to the Goderich-Exeter Railway (GEXR) between Kitchener and London;
- Winnipeg-Churchill service on the Hudson Bay Railway (HBRY) between The Pas, Thompson and Churchill; and
- Vancouver-Courtenay service on the not-for-profit Island Corridor Foundation's former CP/Esquimalt & Nanaimo (E&N) line, which is operated and maintained under contract by the Southern Railway of Vancouver Island.

Due to severe track and bridge deterioration on these short lines, VIA is now facing serious problems. Like the Gaspé route, VIA's Vancouver Island service has been suspended due to infrastructure deterioration since March 2011.



Photo by Braden Furtney

VIA's Summary of the 2016-2020 Corporate Plan noted: "The short line railways generally do not have the financial capacity to invest in infrastructure in order to maintain higher than freight train speeds. This limits the speed at which passenger trains can travel and leads to rail infrastructure deterioration. Further signs of the deterioration trend emerged as operational issues were faced in 2014 in Northern Manitoba (HBRY-owned infrastructure) and even in South West Ontario (GEXR-operated infrastructure), leading to service cancellations and suspensions or slow orders."

The only way the suspended VIA services will return and the others can be stabilized is through public funding for the rehabilitation of the short line trackage they require. As previously noted, the Government of Quebec is attempting to resolve the situation over a portion of the Gaspé route, but not the entire line. For Vancouver Island, a limited amount of federal and provincial funding to return the E&N line to operable condition has been promised, but not yet delivered. As for the GEXR's Kitchener-London line and the HBRY's line from The Pas to Thompson and Churchill, no action or public funding have yet been discussed.

Without public investment in the short line infrastructure required by VIA, the future of these passenger services is in jeopardy.