

9.0 Advancing the SouthwestLynx Plan

SouthwestLynx and its interlocked modal elements cannot be created overnight or without a large and justifiable public investment on a phased basis. What's most concerning now is just how long it will take to get all the various affected parties to even sit down at the same table to discuss it, let alone build it.

Southwestern Ontario doesn't have years to fritter away in yet more discussions that lead to no plans, no investment and no action. The region is going to lose the race with other jurisdictions, such as Northern California, that are well on the way to providing the type of multi-modal public transportation every forward-looking region requires today to be globally competitive, socially vibrant and environmentally robust.

Within the SouthwestLynx concept, there are two projects that can be moved forward faster than all the others and at a thoroughly reasonable cost within existing federal and provincial budgets. These must be the priorities.

9.1 Rail Demonstration Project: North Main Line (Pool Agreement and Operation)

The Toronto-London South Main Line currently hosts five VIA trains in each direction on weekdays, although one eastbound train in the prime afternoon travel slot mysteriously skips making a Woodstock station stop. However, a five-train schedule is at least a reasonable foundation on which to build a high-performance service. Such is not the case on the North Main Line.

The North Main Line suffers from a lack of VIA service for various reasons, all of them specious and easily countered. The most persistent excuse on service expansion provided by VIA and GO is that there is no track capacity available for additional passenger service, particularly on the Bramalea-Georgetown segment of CN's Halton Subdivision.

VIA currently uses four track slots daily for its Toronto-London and Toronto-Sarnia trains, while GO uses 29 track slots on weekdays between Toronto Union Station and Mount Pleasant, Georgetown or Kitchener, all of which use this supposedly capacity-constrained section of CN's Halton Subdivision. There are also an unknown number of non-revenue "deadhead" movements by

GO, although the agency declined to respond to emails asking for details about the route.

With 33 revenue passenger track slots, there is sufficient track capacity to provide the type of service required along the GO route to Kitchener and all the way to Stratford, St. Marys and London. The problem, as previously stated, is that the two publicly-owned operators won't work cooperatively to make it happen.

There is a simple solution to this problem that harks back to a somewhat similar competitive situation that existed in the days when CN and CP ran passenger trains in competition with each other on parallel routes serving the same end points. This is a pool agreement, similar to the one the federal government compelled the two railways to adopt for most of the Quebec-Windsor Corridor routes east of Toronto in the face of falling traffic early in the depression of the 1930s. This approach was also employed on a handful of competitive U.S. rail passenger corridors to improve service and reduce costs.

On the Toronto-Kitchener-London route, the adoption of a pool agreement would blend the VIA and GO services, making possible the coordinated operation of the intercity and commuter trains. With a minimum of 33 revenue passenger slots available on the CN Halton Subdivision, it would not be difficult to initially operate six roundtrips from Toronto to Kitchener and on to London within one year. This level of service wouldn't require any significant infrastructure investment west of Kitchener until the time came to address the lengthened running times that have helped to slowly erode the VIA service in recent years.

Currently, and despite the promises made by VIA in 2015 to expand its service throughout Southwestern Ontario, the railway doesn't have the equipment available to do so. This situation is not going to improve until an order for a new corridor fleet is placed and the equipment is received. In fact, it is likely to get worse as VIA puts more elderly rolling stock through yet another refurbishment program that will take the cars out of service for long periods.

GO, on the other hand, has a growing fleet of its bi-level push-pull trains. But the agency is short of crews due to the incremental expansion of its rail services. This is

being addressed by GO's third-party service provider, Bombardier, but the training process for "new hires" is lengthy and the creation of a large pool of fully-qualified crews is going to take time.

The solution under a VIA-GO North Main Line pool operation is the use of GO equipment and, where necessary, the deployment of qualified VIA crews. While the Bombardier-built bi-level commuter rolling stock does not provide the levels of comfort found on the VIA intercity equipment, it is far from being unsuitable for journeys of the length and time experienced on the North Main Line. It is already employed on a seasonal basis on GO's Toronto-Niagara Falls weekend summer service, which involves journeys of up to 133km, compared with the 195 km length of VIA's North Main Line route.

Furthermore, GO's latest bi-level cars provide enhanced levels of comfort thanks to improved seating. The cars are also flexible and can be altered to provide the types of on-board services found on several high-performance passenger routes in the U.S., including self-service bicycle facilities and small café sections for the sale of beverages and light meals.



Similar to the long-haul commuter operations in the U.S. that are now making use of Bombardier's Thunder Bay-built bi-level rolling stock, such as the New Mexico Rail Runner Express, the SouthwestLynx rail demonstration project would make use of similar equipment, modified for intercity service.

The Thunder Bay-built bi-levels also offer much better passenger accessibility than VIA's current hodge-podge of old equipment. All the stations to be served on the North Main Line, with the exception of Stratford, St. Marys and London, are already equipped with the raised platform sections that enable easy access to these low-floor cars for those using mobility devices.

Under this demonstration project, which would be a lead-in to a more frequent and faster service in the future when VIA receives its promised new intercity motive power and rolling stock, the use of more efficient GO equipment in lieu of the high-cost VIA equipment of today would make possible a fare reduction. VIA's high fares remain a major impediment to passenger attraction and ridership growth.

Neither VIA or GO will release data on the cost per train-mile or car-mile for their various types of equipment. However, it is well known that GO's train operating

costs are at least 50 per cent lower than VIA's. Passing these savings on to passengers, in addition to the tripled frequency, would dramatically boost ridership and revenue on the North Main Line.

Another benefit would be the diversion of VIA's current Toronto-Kitchener-London-Sarnia roundtrip, consisting of VIA #87 westbound and VIA #84 eastbound, to the South Main Line through Woodstock. This would increase the frequency on this faster line to six trains daily in each direction and reduce the Toronto-Sarnia running time by an hour or more. Such a re-routing was part of the aborted 2015 VIA proposal to expand its Southwestern Ontario service.

Under this re-routing, passengers to and from points west of London would be able to make a direct cross-platform transfer to and from the North Main Line trains at London, provided the timetable is recast to ensure this connection.

A preliminary six-train schedule under this pool agreement, based on the current and overly-long VIA running times, and partially based on the multi-train CN and VIA service designs of the past, could start on this basis:

22:00	17:30	14:00	11:30	09:00	06:30	TORONTO	09:20	11:20	14:20	17:20	20:20	01:20
23:35	19:05	15:35	13:05	10:35	08:05	KITCHENER	07:45	09:45	12:45	15:45	18:45	23:45
00:10	19:40	16:10	13:40	11:10	08:40	STRATFORD	07:10	09:10	12:10	15:10	18:10	23:10
00:35	20:05	16:35	14:05	11:35	09:05	ST. MARYS	06:45	08:45	11:45	14:45	17:45	22:45
01:20	20:50	17:20	14:50	12:20	09:50	LONDON	06:00	08:00	11:00	14:00	17:00	22:00

These running times would be reduced progressively under the infrastructure upgrading outlined in Chapter 8.1.2 of this report to eventually provide an accelerated service such as the one proposed in 1989 under the “competitive role” VIA researched and outlined in its Review of Passenger Rail Transportation in Canada. The Toronto-Kitchener-London running time under that scenario would be two hours and 20 minutes and additional infrastructure work not included in it would reduce the travel time further.

The only thing standing in the way of this redesign of the North Main Line service and the modification of the current and inadequate Toronto-Sarnia service is an absence of federal and provincial initiative and cooperation. The urgent need to address these purely political and institutional roadblocks is covered in Chapter 10 of this report.

9.2 Intercommunity Transportation Service Demonstration Project

Through its commissioning and endorsement of the New Directions integrated public transportation tool kit, Oxford County has clearly indicated it recognizes the value of developing an intercommunity transportation service to meet a range of county-wide needs.

Equally important has been the county's recognition of the importance of such a service to act not just as a coordinated feeder to improved rail passenger service, but to also provide a wide range of options for residents to conveniently reach health care, jobs, education, shopping, leisure venues and other activities.



An integrated rail passenger and intercommunity transportation network for Oxford County and throughout Southwestern Ontario would in many ways be a modernized and improved revival of a similar concept that was once applied by CN and CP in the pre-VIA Rail days in various locations across Canada. Photo by Michael Taylor

Attempting to design a multi-faceted system of this nature for Oxford County raises questions that can only be answered through extensive research and consultation with the affected users and those agencies, institutions and businesses that are likely to be the traffic generators.

Where applicable, the existing urban transit operators need to be brought into the planning process, too. This task is outside the terms of reference of this report and needs to be addressed separately, as recommended in Chapter 10 of this report.

However, there is no reason why the preliminary work necessary to move to this more detailed phase of any intercommunity transportation project cannot be undertaken quickly. As part of this project, an examination of the potential intra-county routes and the geographic coverage area were undertaken.

As the largest centre in Oxford, coupled with an established urban transit system and the most significant inter-regional rail passenger service, Woodstock should likely serve as the focal point of any future intercommunity transportation service in Oxford.

The two principal points to be served should be the downtown Woodstock Transit Terminal and, to a lesser extent until the rail service is improved, the city's VIA Rail station. Coordination and integration with Tillsonburg's TGo service will also be essential.

In addition to Woodstock and Tillsonburg, the numerous Oxford County communities that need to be linked to these two urban centres and the intermodal rail and transit connections they will provide are:

Ingersoll	Mount Elgin	Tavistock
Innerkip	Thamesford	Drumbo
Beachville	Sweaburg	Embro
Otterville	Burgessville	Plattsville
Norwich		

Communities just beyond the Oxford-Norfolk boundary that should also be considered for inclusion are Courtland and Delhi.

In addition to these communities, consideration needs to be given to providing service to other nodes

of economic and social activity, and intermodal connectivity, beyond the county's boundaries. These are Stratford, St. Marys, Kitchener-Waterloo and London. All should allow for easy transfers to the expanded rail service in the North Main Line demonstration project, while an intercommunity transportation link to downtown Kitchener would produce a direct connection to the current GO bus service to Bramalea, Mississauga and Toronto, the peak-only weekday GO rail service to Toronto and the Greyhound bus service east and west of Kitchener.

For Oxford County, a key question becomes how best to provide these services: Shall the routes be linear or circular, operating in loops to reach the maximum number of communities? This and more needs to be explored as part of the recommended development process.

What will add immensely to the proposed demonstration project now is the interest shown by adjacent counties and communities in establishing an intercommunity transportation system on an inter-county basis. Perth, Norfolk and Middlesex have all shown interest in developing their own systems, thanks partially to the late-in-the-game announcement by the Government of Ontario of an intercommunity transportation grant program.

The logical approach now is for Oxford County to link with its neighbours to design, develop and launch an inter-county, intercommunity transportation service. Beyond the value it will bring to the communities throughout this multi-county territory is the potential to use it as a template for all of Southwestern Ontario as a key component of the SouthwestLynx plan.

When combined with the expanded and improved services on both Toronto-London rail corridors that are at the heart of the SouthwestLynx Demonstration Project A, the increase in non-automotive mobility that will be delivered by this one will be dramatic. Given the uncertainty of the rail demonstration project even being considered by the federal and provincial governments and agencies whose buy-in is a requirement, the intercommunity transportation demonstration project should be made the priority.

MAP: Intercommunity Bus

