

EFFORT TO RESUME E&N PASSENGER RAIL SERVICE GETS SUPPORT FROM B.C. MINISTER

Posted by Joan Russow

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BY ROB SHAW / TIMES COLONIST JULY 22, 2013 B.C.'s transportation minister says he'll try to persuade Via Rail to restart passenger train service on Vancouver Island's E&N line, as the Island Corridor Foundation sets another make-or-break deadline for the stalled project next month.



The via rail dayliner en route to victoria from courtney in 2009. Photograph by: krista bryce, nanaimo daily news
Todd Stone said he will push the issue federally on behalf of Vancouver Island, after a meeting with Island Corridor officials at the legislature on Monday.

"I understand the holdup at this point is with Via Rail," Stone said.

"The folks this morning wanted to bring me up to speed on where that was at. They certainly weren't asking for much, certainly nothing new from the province. What they are hoping for is that I will, as the minister responsible, reach out to Via and perhaps have a conversation there."

Stone said he'll tackle the issue, noting that with more than \$15 million in federal and provincial funding committed, as well as \$3.2 million from regional districts, "it's time for Via Rail to come to the table" with service.

"If there is the ability to provide some encouragement, some moral suasion perhaps with our federal partners, including Via Rail, I'm absolutely prepared to do that," he said.

The \$18 million in funding is supposed to pay for track, bridge and trestle upgrades along the 223-kilometre Island E&N line, which runs from Victoria to Courtenay.

But the money is contingent on the Island Corridor Foundation first negotiating a new passenger service deal with Via Rail.

Passenger service on the rail line was suspended in March 2011 due to poor track conditions

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and safety concerns.

Via has publicly said it won't restart trains if there's any alteration to the routes that would cost the Crown rail corporation additional money.

The Island Corridor Foundation made a service presentation to Via Rail in April and has been waiting for a response, executive director Graham Bruce said.

"We're not very pleased with that," Bruce said. "The length of time is far too long."

Negotiations will conclude in late August, with or without an agreement, Bruce said.

"I can only keep all the parties together for so long," he said.

Bruce said he's hopeful Stone will meet with the federal transportation minister to push Via Rail to sign the new deal.

Stone said he's cautious of the August deadline. "I understand the sense of urgency here," he said.

Juan de Fuca NDP MLA John Horgan, who has met with Stone and also urged federal rail support, brushed aside the deadline and questioned Bruce's leadership.

"I think Mr. Bruce has come forward with numerous deadlines over the past few years," said Horgan.

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“I think the brinkmanship has to end, and a cooler head at the helm would be a better course of action. Someone the federal government is prepared to talk to.”

Horgan said Bruce is “persona non grata in Tory circles” after a 2011 report by the federal lobbyist commissioner found that Bruce had lobbied on behalf of the Cowichan Tribes without being properly registered.

“That may well be restricting his ability to get action in Ottawa,” Horgan said.

“Maybe it’s time to look at someone else to do that work.”

Island Corridor Foundation chairwoman Mary Ashley said the board doesn’t share Horgan’s concern and has confidence in Bruce’s leadership.

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