



## **SUBMISSION TO ONTARIO TOURISM COMPETITIVENESS STUDY**

**SUDBURY CONSULTATION: SEPTEMBER 19, 2008**

The Coalition for Algoma Passenger Trains (CAPT) is a regional group of individuals, businesses and other stakeholders who recognize the significant social, economic, cultural, historical and environmental value of Algoma Central Railway (ACR) wilderness passenger trains. The Coalition consists of municipalities, Aboriginal communities, tourist resort operators and cottage/camp-owners along the rail line. We are dedicated to preserving and enhancing this remote passenger train service as a way to develop a wilderness, heritage and tourism corridor—an important economic diversification strategy to provide employment in communities formerly reliant on the resource-harvesting industries. These communities are experiencing increased unemployment and poverty especially due to the huge decline in forestry.

This submission primarily replies to the following two questions in the discussion paper:

- The product: How can we provide the experiences tourists want?
- The tools: What are the appropriate roles for governments?

The ACR passenger train travels through the very beautiful Algoma landscape most of which has no road access. The lack of road access into most of the rail corridor helps to preserve the pristine nature of the wilderness.

We quote the Opportunity Study which was conducted in 2007 by Douglass Legg of Malone Given Parsons Ltd.:

Nature-based tourism is growing worldwide at an estimated rate of 10-30 per cent per annum. .... According to the CTC, Canada is known around the world for outdoor adventure and ecotourism--- these are real icons for Canada and a core competence of tourism in Northern Ontario.

The remoteness of Northern Ontario is an influential factor to drawing visitors. Forty per cent of U.S. and 33 per cent of Canadian visitors to Northern Ontario indicate they prefer to visit

undiscovered places before too many hotels and restaurants are built (2006 TAMS).

In the Ipos Reid 2007 study of consumers' attitudes and perceptions of Northern Ontario (OTMPC, 2007), outdoor activities were cited most often as motivation to travel to Northern Ontario.

**Interestingly, the one motivation for travelling to Northern Ontario shared by all markets was the northern train (pages 51-52)<sup>1</sup>.**

Since 1914 the Algoma Central Railway has transported tourists into experiences based on the primary Canadian icons: Indigenous people, territories and culture; pristine northern wilderness and the setting in which the famous Group of Seven painters, Canada's most historically significant artists, painted their best work.

Train-in tourism is a more lucrative and environmentally respectful approach to tourism than road-based tourism. .

Tourists are travelers and traveling is not well supported in Ontario. There is so much emphasis on the automobile, but that form of transportation is expensive, uncomfortable for long distances and environmentally detrimental. It is exclusionary as it is limited to those who can afford cars that can withstand the wear and tear of long distances and to those who do not have disabilities and limitations due to age. Increasingly the car is becoming a mode of transportation for local trips. Ontario is far too big for automobile travel. In addition, our weather deters people from driving long distances from November to May--7 months of the year. Trains are a comfortable, pleasant and safe way to travel in all four Canadian seasons.

In rail, Canada tolerates monopolies that are not tolerated in roads. Innumerable trucking companies, bus lines and individual automobiles have access to highways which are provided and maintained as public infrastructure by our governments. We do not have one trucking company or one bus company with total ownership and control of the Trans Canada Highway. Government has to reassert its role in making it possible for Canadian individuals and businesses seeking passenger train service to have access to rail beds. Rail beds were built with the help of massive amounts of public capital funding. Canadians, including those working in tourism should continue to benefit from the public investment. And that investment should be preserved by on-going maintenance and upgrades. Because of the slow orders due to poor condition of the rail bed, it now takes about 12 hours to take the train from Sault Ste. Marie to Hearst, with no food service available on the train and none available at stops along the way.

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<sup>1</sup>Legg, Douglass, Malone Given Parsons Ltd.2007."Opportunity Study: Algoma Central Railway: Wilderness Tourism by Rail"

In addition to improving the rail beds, the two senior levels of government should invest in updating the rolling stock and stations. There is only one functioning ACR station—the one in Sault Ste. Marie. The charming heritage stations in Hawk Junction and Searchmont are deteriorating rapidly. The one in Searchmont is abandoned with broken windows and the Hawk Junction station is staffed only during summer season, has no heat and the washroom fixtures are full of rust. Having functioning stations in those two locations would be a huge benefit to Searchmont Resort and tourism in Wawa.

Furthermore, the government should contribute funds for research and planning. Included in the list of required research areas identified by the Opportunity Study are:

- a tourism product/market match study of the ACR rail corridor
- a product-facility gap analysis to determine areas to be addressed to meet consumers' needs
- coordination of the resolution of identified market readiness issues with operators/suppliers, destination and sectoral marketing organizations and government agencies
- assessment of the competitive offerings of competitor destinations
- work with operators/suppliers to identify critical attributes of the ACR tourism products that can be used to differentiate competitive offerings
- work with ACR, operator/suppliers and destination and sectoral marketing organizations to develop a product development and marketing strategy to exploit the corridor's unique selling points
- a two-year plan for increasing consumer awareness of the ACR wilderness tourism corridor
- expanded case study of other Canadian regional passenger railways, including fare structures, operating costs and revenues and capital maintenance costs, as well as economic and social benefits and costs
- regional economic impact assessment of the Algoma passenger train service

And finally, government should take the lead in planning initiatives leading to a schedule coordination of the various rail lines which if properly coordinated could form an invaluable transportation network linking all parts of the province for tourists. Such a rail network would not only facilitate the successful transportation of tourists, it would also benefit all Ontarians economically, socially, culturally and environmentally. For example, it would facilitate travel to health care services, colleges and universities.

Public investment in the northern Ontario railways will contribute to the flourishing of tourism businesses just as government investment in roads is essential infrastructure for businesses to function and prosper.

In addition to the urgent need for rail infrastructure investment, the Ontario government should make substantial investment in the development of other

tourism products in the rail corridor. The tourist operators need both financial and advisory help with upgrading their resorts, B and Bs, restaurants, outfitting businesses to a level of quality that will attract tourists, bring them back or have them tell others about their excellent experiences. Tourists want remote wilderness, but they also want the comfort of quality accommodations and travel.

In conclusion, we believe that government has a crucial role to play in developing a world class wilderness rail corridor that links northern Ontario to southern Ontario. That railway corridor is the ideal way to provide tourists with the kinds of quintessentially Canadian experiences they seek when coming to Canada, such as: wilderness and landscapes painted by the Group of Seven, Aboriginal culture, remote Northern trains. Government's role in this undertaking includes funding for research and planning of the rail tourism corridor, financial support for rail infrastructure and possibly developing an appropriate public management model for the passenger service. The Ontario Government could also play a leadership role in facilitating regional economic development in tourism by bringing together all the stakeholders along the rail corridor and supporting a collaborative effort to realize this unique tourism opportunity.

We are very grateful that your commission has given us the time to present an introduction to some of our ideas.

Respectfully submitted,

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