

REVIVING RAIL PASSENGER SERVICE

IN

NORTHERN ONTARIO

'IS IT POSSIBLE AND HOW CAN IT HAPPEN'

A DISCUSSION PAPER

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INTRODUCTION:

This paper has been produced to give a brief history of the dilution of passenger train service in the north, what it looks like today and how it could possibly be revised with the right attention in key areas. The concepts contained herein are those of the writer only with very little input from any other source other than research of information available in the public domain. Some of the ideas put forth are easily implemented with few adjustments to current systems while others are more complicated – possibly requiring government intervention, especially from the Province of Ontario.

HISTORY:

With advent of the opening of the Trans Canada Highway around Lake Superior and the introduction of regularly, scheduled air services from the north, the rail passenger services of both Canadian Pacific and Canadian National slowly declined and VIA Rail was created to take their places. Eventually, VIA consolidated its runs so that it only operates on the CN Transcontinental line through Sudbury to Winnipeg. Communities like Thunder Bay, Dryden and Kenora lost their passenger services.

The Sault Ste. Marie to Sudbury Budd car that was so badly marketed (poor connections and slow service), many abandoned it for other means and service was discontinued in 1976. Only a few services survived until today and they are maintained because the areas serviced are considered remote with no other means of conveyance. One regular passenger service remains today albeit with diminished capacity and propped up by the provincial government.

CURRENT RAIL PASSENGER SERVICES:

- **VIA Rail – Toronto to Vancouver through Sudbury (4 days per week)**
- **VIA Rail – Sudbury to White River (up one day back the next except Sat.)**
- **ACR – Sault Ste. Marie to Hearst (up 3 days down 3 days – no Tues.)**
- **ONTC – Cochrane to Moosonee (daily except Sat in summer, M-F winter)**
- **ONTC – Cochrane to Toronto (daily except Sat.).**

CURRENT RAIL FEIGHT SERVICES:

- **Canadian National – to/from Toronto - Western Canada & No. Ontario**
- **Canadian Pacific - “ “ “ “**
- **CNR (Algoma Central – between Sault Ste. Marie and Hearst**
- **Huron Central – between Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury**
- **ONTC – between Hearst and North Bay also Cochrane to Moosonee**
- **Ottawa Valley Rail Link – Sudbury to Smiths Falls and Temiscaming.**
- **CNR Thunder Bay to Rainy River**

SAULT STE. MARIE – SUDBURY LINE:

The Huron Central Railway operating over the former CP Rail (leased to HCR) is one of a number of short lines in the Province requiring assistance to upgrade their line to normal operating standards. At this time, the line is not up to AAR standards for even freight service and trains must travel at very-low, reduced speeds to avoid derailment. Currently, negotiations are underway with all 3 levels of government (federal, provincial and municipal) and concerned industries to see that the necessary upgrades are fulfilled. From this standpoint, they need to go a step further and bring it up to passenger train standard which is the highest level. If the parties accomplished this, then the potential to revitalize passenger train service could be considered and realized.

POTENTIAL FOR A NEW SAULT STE. MARIE TO TORONTO SERVICE:

With a revitalized Huron Central line, passenger trains could once again operate from Sault Ste. Marie to Sudbury with early morning departures from both cities and late afternoon returns. Freight services could be operated at night freely with no interference from passenger trains.

If passenger trains were able to operate at 100 km or 60 mph with limited stops in between, this service would be able to attract many customers traveling to Sudbury for medical services or wishing to transfer to Toronto. Sudbury patrons could be attracted to the service with Casino packages and the like in the twin Saults.

For passengers wishing to transfer and go on to Toronto, the service should be extended from Sudbury to North Bay wherein travelers could pickup the southbound ONTC Northlander.

Theoretically the service would look like:

**Lv. Sault Ste. Marie at 07:00 hours
Ar. Sudbury at 10:15 hours
Lv. Sudbury at 10:30 hours (OV Rail Link)
Ar. North Bay at 12:00 noon (transfer to ONTC by cab or bus)
Lv. North Bay at 13:35 hours
Ar. Toronto at 19:15 hours**

Return:

**Lv. Toronto at 08:40 hours
Ar. North Bay at 13:50 hours (transfer to OV Rail Link by cab or bus)
Lv. North Bay at 14:50 hours
Ar. Sudbury at 16:30 hours
Lv. Sudbury at 16:45 hours
Ar. Sault Ste. Marie at 20:00 hours**

In the above schedule, train times between Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury (190 miles) and Sudbury and North Bay (75 miles) could be achievable at 60 mph. There would be enough time at the transfer in North Bay (1 1/2 hours) to adjust these times accordingly if needed. The duration of this proposed trip is around 12 hours while bus service is 11 hours but incomparable for comfort. For simplicity, only one train would operate between SSM and Sudbury – leaving the Sault in the morning and returning late afternoon. The addition of a morning train from Sudbury to SSM could be entertained as demand warranted. There is also the potential for a train service beyond North Bay to Ottawa for connections to Montreal using the OV Rail Link line to Pembroke and Ottawa Central Railway to Ottawa.

WHO WOULD OPERATE THIS TRAIN SERVICE?

Passenger train services for the most part in Canada are operated by VIA Rail. Recently, there have been indications that VIA Rail must cut expenses and that will likely be translated into service reductions somewhere within their system. From a more logical point of view, ONTC could run this service because they have the ‘know how’, would have provincial backing, and could provide a reasonable fare structure by operating the entire service. As well, if the provincial government is involved in the rehab of the HCR line and they could become the outright owners, then it would be a natural for ONTC to provide this service.

ALGOMA CENTRAL RAILWAY SSM TO HEARST:

The ACR passenger train is one of the remote services provided with a yearly, federal government subsidy to cover its losses. Why this service was never turned over to VIA Rail when other railways’ services were discontinued is unknown to the writer. It might do better as a VIA service because their mandate suggests ‘efficient, environmentally sustainable and cost-effective passenger transportation.’ CN being strictly a freight operator doesn’t appear on the surface to have the desire to operate and/or improve this operation. The Agawa Tour Train has a new life but only after a huge infusion of money from the Province. Luckily for this train, the City of Sault Ste. Marie’s Tourism Dep’t does a lot to promote this tour.

VIA RAIL SUDBURY TO WHITE RIVER:

This is another of the remote services in Northern Ontario that provides passenger service to communities not accessed by road and to numerous out-post, tourist camps along the way. While it appears to offer an adequate service to this region, it falls short of providing a rail option to many other communities just beyond including Marathon, Terrace Bay, Schreiber and onward to Thunder Bay. After Sudbury, Thunder Bay is the second largest city in the North (pop. 150,000) but has no rail passenger service.

POTENTIAL FOR A THUNDER BAY TO SUDBURY SERVICE:

As Thunder Bay and Sudbury are both on the mainline of CP Rail, this would be an ideal route to re-establish a passenger train for obvious reasons. It's scenic and there is already the Via Rail train from Sudbury to White River that could be replaced by a new modern, more efficient unit. A new train would offer Thunder Bay and area residents another travel option especially since Greyhound may remove its services along the Lake Superior shore. In order to visualize what a Thunder Bay to Sudbury service would look like, we broke down the current White River train schedule. The distance is 484 km with duration of 9.5 hours so the average speed is 50 kph (30 mph). Therefore as Thunder Bay is 874 kms and at 50 kph one can assume a time of 17.5 hours. But realistically, a modern train set as versus a Budd Car should achieve faster speeds and so using a modest improvement to 75 kph (46mph) would shorten the time to 12 hours. In order make the necessary connections at Sudbury; a service could look like the following:

Lv. Thunder Bay at 22:45 hours

Ar. Sudbury at 09:45 hours (transfer to North Bay train)

Lv. Sudbury at 17:30 hours

Ar. Thunder Bay at 05:30 hours

The only drawback to such a service would be that many communities in between would receive their service during the night but perhaps this would be better than no service at all. Again, only one train would be utilized to reduce costs and operate eastbound on Mon. Wed. Fri. and westbound Tues. Thur. Sat. with no Sun. service. Residents in the communities west of Thunder Bay such as Dryden, Kenora and Fort Frances quite often go to Winnipeg to shop and for medical services. None-the-less, if a train service was desired, it could be provided between Kenora and Thunder Bay with other communities being connected by local bus service as are the communities west of Cochrane over to Hearst currently served.

In order to make connections at Thunder Bay this service would have to look something like the following:

Lv. Kenora at 14:00 hours

Ar. Thunder Bay at 21:00 hours

Lv. Thunder Bay at 06:30 hours

Ar. Kenora at 13:30 hours

ONTARIO NORTHLAND PASSENGER SERVICES:

The Cochrane to Moosonee passenger train is another one of the remote services but seems to provide adequate coverage for the region. The Northlander is a full service train and operates daily except Saturday between Cochrane and Toronto. These two services don't appear to need any sort of additions at this time as both are adequately funded by the Province. The Northlander also receives a subsidy from the Federal Government to cover the portion from North Bay to Toronto.

SO HOW CAN THESE SERVICES BE REVIVED?

Rail passenger services in Canada for the most part are the edict of VIA Rail and it seems logical that they should be pressured to look into the revitalization of services throughout Northern Ontario. But it is common knowledge that VIA has not added any new services in many years and with pressure on them by the Federal government to reduce costs, it is highly unlikely that they would take up the challenge to re-introduce the services northerners want and need. The major railways don't want anything to do with passenger services so it doesn't leave many options. Perhaps the only one is the Provincial Government who already supports the services of the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission.

Unfortunately, the ONTC only serves a very slim corridor along Highway 11 from North Bay to Cochrane and beyond to Moosonee and Hearst. The rest of Northern Ontario including the major communities such as Sudbury, Sault Ste. Marie and Thunder Bay, and smaller communities such as Elliot Lake, Dryden and Kenora are left without any passenger service. This statement is not totally true as Sudbury does have VIA service but there are no connections with any of the others.

It's probably about time these Northern Communities banded together to pressure the Province to look into reviving passenger train services as indicated in this paper. For far too long, the infrastructure needs of the north have been neglected or at least under funded to the benefit of the south. Transportation options in the north are limited, fuel costs are much higher and distances are far too long. Winter weather in this region can also be another factor for safer, more efficient rail passenger transportation. There's no better time than now to start a lobby for help.

TALKING POINTS:

- Lobby for the Huron Central Railway rehabilitation process to be upgraded to a full, passenger train standard.**
- Lobby governments for the creation of a Northern Ontario, Rail-Passenger Transportation Authority and Fund with regular, annual appropriations.**

- **Encourage the initiation of a new Sault Ste. Marie to Sudbury passenger service as a trial with an extension to North Bay for connections once the Huron Central line is upgraded.**
- **Encourage governments to implement a study to look into the development of rail passenger hubs i.e. Sudbury, North Bay and Thunder Bay.**
- **Lobby the Province of Ontario to consider expanding the mandate of the ONTC to include all passenger services in Northern Ontario.**
- **Lobby the Federal Government to convert the ACR Passenger train to a VIA Rail service.**
- **Encourage the northern communities to form a coalition with its main focus being the revival of passenger transportation services for the north.**
- **Consider CAPT as the main linch-pin to kick start these initiatives.**

There are probably other comments that are fitting and could be added to this list by others on the CAPT committee.