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Interprovincial Rail System to Serve Canada's Capital Region



Pictured from left to right: David Reid, Mayor of Arnprior; Denis Staples, Mayor of Smiths Falls; Gilles Clément, Mayor of Papineauville; Claude Levac, Mayor of Casselman, Steve Fanjoy, mOose, Michael Lachapelle, mOose; Brent Orr, Mayor of Bristol; Joseph Potvin, President mOose. Also present, but outside this photo, was Robert Bussière, Mayor of La Pêche.

mOose Passenger Rail Plan discussed with area Mayors at informal consultative meeting

September 7, 2011, Gatineau: Friday marked a major stepping-stone in the efforts by private sector company mOose Inc. to re-introduce regional passenger rail services across 400 km of existing track in and around Canada's National Capital Region (NCR). On Friday 2 September, six mayors from the outlying areas of the NCR met with mOose executives in Gatineau to be briefed on the plan, which would be a game-changer for transit throughout the entire region. The ambitious start-up for the mOose train system is targeted for the winter of 2012-13.

The company also announced at the meeting its own investor-supplied seed funding of \$25,000 to initiate a whole-region transportation model. Company directors are seeking the active collaboration of public sector bodies throughout the region in sharing their existing transportation data as a basis for integrated demand estimates and operating costs for this new service. The company commits to share the broad regional model for independent planning and peer review by anyone.

mOOse, which stands for Mobility Ottawa-Outaouais Systems and Enterprises Inc., is working to create the "mOOse Consortium" as a structured collaboration amongst small, medium and large organizations, from both private and public sectors, to operate fully-integrated passenger rail and supporting services along a six-community, three-line system between La Pêche/Wakefield QC and Smiths Falls ON, between Arnprior ON and Papineauville/Montebello QC, and between Bristol QC and Casselman/Maxville ON. The interprovincial system will connect Ottawa and Gatineau across the existing Prince of Wales Bridge, and offer convenient passenger transfer points with Ottawa's eventual downtown LRT system at the Bayview and Tremblay Rd stations.

"Already we have received notice that VIA Rail Canada is open in principle to providing access to its tracks to Smiths Falls and to Casselman/Maxville" said Joseph Potvin, President and General Manager of mOOse Inc. "That shared access would be based on the assumption that VIA's own scheduled service and maintenance needs would continue to have priority. There are passing tracks and sidings to ensure that." Potvin said that mOOse Inc. will soon be making formal approaches to Capital Railway, operator of the O-Train, the Société de transport ferroviaire de Gatineau (STFG) which is owned by the STO, the Compagnie du chemin de fer de l'Outaouais (CCFO) which oversees the steam train to Wakefield, and other current and planned services such as Transport Pontiac-Renfrew TPR.

All the participating mayors agreed on the value of collaboration amongst municipalities throughout the region. Casselman Mayor, Claude Levac noted: "For each little community running its own transit solution, the administration costs are too high. It's clear that this regionally integrated mOOse service could dramatically reduce the administration cost per passenger."

"The local area of demand for passenger rail service is much larger than Papineauville by itself" said Gilles Clément, Mayor of Papineauville. Brent Orr, Mayor of Bristol, shared this view: "The potential traveller market for a rail service in our area extends as far as Fort Coulonge".

Dennis Staples, Mayor of Smiths Falls explained: "Within 25-30 km of Smiths Falls there are 30,000 people, so Smiths Falls with its population of 9,000 is itself a hub. The fact is though, Smiths Falls has lost 1,700 jobs in recent years. Job losses mean a lot more people have to commute to Ottawa. Since Smiths Falls is more affordable than Ottawa, people still want to live here. So despite our local job losses, new homes are still being built. That means that the transportation problem is getting worse. Currently there are around 22,000 vehicles per day from the Lanark County and the United County of Leeds and Grenville that travel into Ottawa", he said.

Arnprior's David Reid added: "We have about 3,500 households, which about a third have at least one person commuting to Ottawa/Gatineau for work. If you factor in personal trips the total would exceed a third of all households on a daily basis. The overall Township of McNab/Braeside probably has an additional 2000 households within 10 kms of Arnprior, with a similar proportion also commuting to Ottawa."

As attractive as a regional rail service may sound in planning, Robert Bussière, Mayor of La Pêche cautioned company directors to manage risk carefully. "One of the biggest challenges for any transit solution in smaller communities is the change in culture of self reliance, people's general preference for individual transportation". The mayors from all the other communities agreed. He said: "I'm all for it in principle. But the actual viability of a passenger rail service remains to be seen. La Pêche has tried running a commuter bus service in the past, but it was not used sufficiently."

Claude Levac, Mayor of Casselman noted that each community is different in this regard. "Since highway 417 comes right through Casselman, people forget that it was originally a railway town. By comparison, people in Maxville and Alexandria have kept more of a rail culture", he said. "Being off the main highway, people in those communities are more accustomed to using VIA's train service into the city. The main problem is that its schedule is not well suited for commuters. mOOse would offer a lot more convenience for them. The service should depart Alexandria at 6 AM then come through Casselman at 6:30." David Reid, Mayor of Arnprior added that, "Travel costs are critical to success, followed closely by reliability and scheduling. Special events can also be used to help change people from car culture, to rail culture."

The 2 September meeting included discussions with executives of two of Canada's largest railway construction and maintenance firms Railterm and PNR Railworks. mOOse Inc. wants to ensure that all existing tracks and bridges are brought to a minimum Class 3 safe standard for passenger rail. Officials from Railterm and PNR Railworks noted that some of the lines that mOOse Inc. wishes to use are already in top shape, such as the Casselman/Maxville and the Smiths Falls routes. They said the lines to Montebello and Arnprior may need minor work to be Class 3, though Nylene Inc has already put in significant investment to keep up the Arnprior line. The lines to Wakefield and Bristol will need the most attention to bring to Class 3, but it can be done.

The railway maintenance companies confirmed that the rough figures advanced by mOOse for upgrade costs were generally correct. Michael Richardson, mOOse's Technology Director explained: "We are considering that installing new track costs about \$750,000 per km, though it depends a lot on terrain. Crossings with automatic barriers cost about \$150,000, and simpler signals cost \$20,000 each. A switch costs \$300,000." "To get this system up and running, we're putting together a comprehensive financing plan in collaboration with stakeholders," said Potvin, an economist by trade.

The company unveiled its high-level business model for financing the plan, and for attracting the interest and coordination of multiple stakeholders to see their service materialize. "This is precisely why mOOse has developed a consortium model", said Marketing and Communications Director Peter Gabany. "The mOOse plan draws focus to the fact that the Canada's National Capital Region is already intersected by rail lines, so the possibility simply moves to intelligent business planning, and basic political will."

Greg Somers, also a company Director, explained to the Mayors the significance of Section 92.10(a) of Canada's Constitution, which established that any transportation service that cross provincial boundaries comes under the unified rules of federal regulation. "This greatly

simplifies the situation, compared with any other assortment of municipalities that are spread across two provinces", he said.

For decades people have struggled with how to deliver effective passenger transportation to work within their own municipal or provincial mandates. "That's the beauty of the clause in Canada's Constitution that applies to interprovincial transportation. That artifact from 1867 makes it practical today for municipalities and the provinces to integrate their systems, to create something that will benefit so very many people today", says Communications Director, Peter Gabany.

The Mayors said they are very interested participating in the mOOse regional transportation modeling study, but explained that the timing is difficult in their budget cycle. Municipalities are extremely short of funds. So they hope there may be provincial or federal funding for this purpose.

mOOse is planning to submit some specific actionable proposals to all Mayors and Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs) throughout the planned mOOse service area. The six mayors at the meeting said they will discuss any proposals with their respective CAOs, Councils, citizens and businesses, and will assist with consultation. They also agreed to keep these consultation events open to regional participants from both sides of the provincial border.

"The mOOse idea is grounded on the infrastructure that our great and great great grandparents bought and paid for in the late 1800s. Rules which that generation put into Canada's constitution protect interprovincial transportation from the complications that multiple jurisdictions would otherwise impose", said Potvin. "To that multi-billion dollar inheritance, we are bringing forward a highly pragmatic business model that can get trains running safely and promptly throughout the region. Using these railway corridors for the purpose our great-grandparents built them will certainly help people across this region to adapt, as energy price shocks play out over the next 5 and 10 years"

This is undoubtedly what has caught the attention and imaginations of the Mayors from La Pêche, Papineauville, Bristol, Arnprior, Casselman and Smith Falls. "Having an efficient passenger rail service will enhance our ability to resolve a number of economic concerns", said Dennis Staples from Smiths Falls.

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