

MYMUSKOKANOW

PASSENGER RAIL SERVICE COULD RETURN TO MUSKOKA

DOUG CROSSE, STAFF THURSDAY FEB. 21ST, 2019



There is still a passenger waiting area for train service in Bracebridge. (Doug Crosse Photo)

(with files from Bob McIntyre – Timmins Bureau)



Regular passenger service to the region was discontinued in 2012 but a pair of lobby groups are hoping an election promise made last year by the Progressive Conservative government will be kept, making way for a return to scheduled service.

Lucille Frith is the co-chair for two groups who have been working with various levels of government to try and get the rolling stock moving again through cottage country.

In her roles with the North Eastern Ontario Rail Network (NEORN) and the Committee Promoting Muskoka Rail Travel (CPMRT) she has been keeping the pressure on with the province to ensure \$45 million promised at election time is going to be included in the budget scheduled to be revealed within the next two weeks.

“Pursuant to the cancellation of passenger rail service in 2012, both NDP and PC parties supported the return of passenger rail service during their campaigns,” reveals Frith. “The PC party committed \$45 million (\$30 million for capital and \$15 million for operating expenses) to put the train into operation.”

Frith says as little as six years ago passenger traffic was fairly robust in Muskoka despite no marketing or other information that it was even possible to take a train to the area.

She reveals in the last year of operation the Ontario Northland service saw 50 per cent of passengers got off or on between Toronto and North Bay. This would equal just under 20,000 riders in 2011-2012.

“A workable train schedule for Muskoka along with marketing to the 705 as well as to the 416, and 905 seasonal residents should be very effective in ensuring ridership for the area,” Frith contends. “Connecting with Metrolinx GO trains at Aurora/Richmond Hill area would be beneficial.”

Corina Moore is the President and CEO of Ontario Northland and is tasked with revitalizing a passenger link between northern and southern Ontario. Frith says the company needs to be directed by the government to provide the service in order for it to be effective.

“Ontario Northland needs to be given a new mandate by the government- to include the development and execution of a plan to bring back passenger rail service as soon as possible,” says Frith.

A small pilot project measuring the appetite for rail service in the area took place last summer as Ontario Northland’s bus service linked with Go riders in Barrie on Friday nights. The bus would drop passengers in Gravenhurst, Bracebridge, and Huntsville, returning them Sunday nights to the Aurora Go station.

According to Frith the bus was full each trip, though a number of riders would get alternate ways home on Sunday nights with other visitors who were driving personal vehicles.

A splinter group of rail activists has been working the northern Ontario route, trying to encourage passenger traffic on the 700-kilometer route between Cochrane and Toronto. “All Aboard Northern Ontario” founder Eric Boutilier of North Bay says a lack of money has stalled work on compiling a case to present to both senior levels of government.

The group was counting on financial support from municipalities all along the line. Boutilier says only the Timiskaming and Northeastern Ontario Municipal Associations contributed. None south of Temagami chipped in.

“One has got to have deep pockets in order to effect change in a meaningful way,” Boutilier comments. “ So All Aboard Northern Ontario has brought this as far as we can with the resources that we’ve been provided and without more, the project is suspended until further notice.”

Online fundraising has begun, but Boutilier doesn’t expect it to be enough. He won’t give a deadline for making the suspension permanent, other than “probably in the next little while.”

Frith believes passenger rail will once again be a reality in Muskoka. There are even people keeping an eye on available used rolling stock that can be refurbished and put into service. But the key will be the Ford Government keeping its 2018 budget promise.

Information sourced in 2013

Transportation Service Reductions in the Northeast



Hawk Junction Station



ALGOMA CENTRAL RAILWAY

SAULT-STE-MARIE - HAWK JCT - HEARST

3x weekly passenger train service suspended temporarily (July 2015)



BEARSKIN AIRLINES

OTTAWA - NORTH BAY
weekly scheduled flight service canceled (April 2014)



CARIBOU COACH LINES

HEARST - LONGLAC
3x weekly motor coach service suspended indefinitely (March 2015)



GREYHOUND CANADA

OTTAWA - NORTH BAY - SUDBURY
3x daily motor coach service reduced to 1x daily (September 2015)

SUDBURY - SAULT-STE-MARIE - THUNDER BAY

2x daily motor coach service reduced to 1x daily (September 2015)

TORONTO - SUDBURY
3x daily motor coach service reduced to 1x daily (September 2015)



ONTARIO NORTHLAND

KAPUSKASING - HEARST
1x daily motor coach service reduced to 3x weekly (November 2015)

MATHESON - IROQUOIS FALLS - COCHRANE

2x daily motor coach service reduced to 1x daily (November 2015)

TIMMINS - COCHRANE
3x daily motor coach service reduced to 2x daily (November 2015)



Northlander TEE-Train - North Bay



ONTARIO NORTHLAND

TORONTO - NORTH BAY - COCHRANE
6x weekly passenger train service canceled (September 2012)



Foley Station



VIA RAIL CANADA

TORONTO - SUDBURY - VANCOUVER
3x weekly winter passenger train service reduced to 2x weekly (June 2012)

Investment Comparison for Passenger Trains in Canada

ALGOMA CENTRAL RAILWAY

SSM - HEARST TRAIN	0.07 ¢	FUNDING PER ONTARIAN	0 \$
FUNDING PER CANADIAN			
2.2 MILLION DOLLARS Annual funding from the RRPRSCCP		No annual funding from the provincial government	

ONTARIO NORTHLAND

NORTHLANDER	0.07 ¢	FUNDING PER ONTARIAN	0.86 ¢
FUNDING PER CANADIAN			
2.5 MILLION DOLLARS Annual funding from the RRPRSCCP *canceled in 2012		11 MILLION DOLLARS Annual funding from the provincial government *canceled in 2012	

POLAR BEAR EXPRESS	0 \$	FUNDING PER ONTARIAN	1.47 \$
FUNDING PER CANADIAN			
No annual funding from the federal government		18.9 MILLION DOLLARS Annual funding from the provincial government	

METROLINX

BETWEEN ONE & TWO BILLION DOLLARS IN ADDITIONAL ANNUAL FUNDING	GO TRANSIT NETWORK	155.62 \$
	FUNDING PER ONTARIAN	
GO Transit also benefits from combined funding from the provincial & federal governments	2 BILLION DOLLARS Base annual funding from the province of Ontario	

VIA RAIL CANADA (Network)

OPERATING	9.47 \$	CAPITAL	2.41 \$
FUNDING PER CANADIAN		FUNDING PER CANADIAN	
317.1 MILLION DOLLARS (2014) Operating funding from the federal government (subject to review annually)		80.9 MILLION DOLLARS (2014) Capital funding from the federal government (subject to review annually)	

RRPRSCCP : Regional and Remote Passenger Rail Services Class Contribution Program



NEORN
Northern & Eastern Ontario Rail Network



For information sources, visit : www.neorn.ca

Photos: Eric Boutilier