

NDP, PCs would bring back Northlander

by PJ Wilson, [The Nugget](#)

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Every time winter weather affects travel in northeastern Ontario, Coun. Mark King says people talk about bringing back passenger rail service.

But “we lost (the Northlander) train service a fair time ago,” King, of North Bay, said this week. “It’s not something people are talking about in general.

“What does happen is the discussion comes up when we get some bad weather.”

That’s been happening on an almost-regular basis this winter, as Highway 11 north of North Bay has been shut down on several occasions due to crashes or just generally bad driving conditions.

“The best possible alternative is rail service from Toronto to the North,” King said.

Northern Development and Mines Minister Michael Gravelle has all but ruled out a resumption of passenger train service such as was offered by Ontario Northland until 2012.

King asked Gravelle at the recent Rural Ontario Municipal Association meeting in Toronto about the possibility of reinstating the service, but “he basically said no, they are not going to reinstate it.”

Gravelle did, however, say the province will be “making an announcement in North Bay in respect to multimodal transportation.”

The province has been developing a draft strategy to provide different forms of transportation in the North in the wake of public consultations last year.

“We did indicate to the minister, we were asking for him to support the return of passenger train service,” King said.

“During our conversation I indicated to him that all the municipalities along the line passed resolutions supporting the return of passenger rail service.”

North Bay was the last municipality along the Cochrane to North Bay corridor to pass the resolution at a meeting Dec. 12 calling for the return of a passenger train.

Both the provincial Progressive Conservatives and the NDP have indicated they will reinstate the service if they form the new government after the June 7 provincial election.

King said Nipissing MPP Vic Fedeli “reaffirmed the PC caucus plan for rail traffic in Northern Ontario,” with an allocation of \$30 million to provide for that.

“I said what we require is good service with good equipment, trains that don’t break down every day and that operate in 25-, 30-below weather,” King said.

Fedeli, he said, indicated there will be two new sets of trains purchased for the service.

“That’s perfect,” King said.

What is especially galling, King said, is that “literally the next week” after the Northlander passenger train was retired, work started on a rail service from Pearson International Airport to downtown Toronto.

“That point has always been crucial,” King said. “If (the province) can subsidize rail traffic in southern Ontario, they had better damned well provide service in Northern Ontario.”

At the December council meeting, King said the loss of passenger rail service “is a huge, huge drawback to this particular region,” pointing to GO Transit expansion projects and subsidies for riders using the Union Pearson Express as examples of the imbalance.

King said it’s not only riders who are losing out, noting the province’s “substantial” investments in passenger rail services in southern Ontario are also helping to drive overall economic development in host communities.

The [Northern and Eastern Ontario Rail Network](#) has been working for some time now to bring the issue of rail passenger service for the North to the attention of Queen’s Park and Parliament Hill.

Another grassroots organization – All Aboard Northern Ontario – led by North Bay resident Eric Boutilier, who was previously involved with the network, also is campaigning for the return of the Northlander train service.

Boutilier says he is working on a data-based proposal for the restoration of the service, which was cancelled in 2012.

The ministry has indicated its Northern Ontario Multimodal Transportation Strategy will be released early this year.