

Removal of Via Rail Dayliners concerns View Royal mayor

timescolonist.com
Sun Nov 6 2011
Section: OnLine
Byline: **Chris Koehn**

NANAIMO -- View Royal Mayor Graham Hill is among those concerned about the future of rail on Vancouver Island, after Via Rail's Dayliners left Nanaimo on a barge headed for Eastern Canada Saturday.

"I am a bit concerned about the signal that this sends," Hill said during the weekend after travelling to Nanaimo to witness the removal of the two passenger cars.

However, he's also hopeful about the return of a better service with much-improved Dayliners next year.

When Via suspended its operations between Courtenay and Victoria in March due to poor track conditions, Graham Bruce, the executive director of the Island Corridor Foundation, began pressing governments for the funds to restore the railway.

Via will not return with passenger service until track maintenance is completed, but so far, only the provincial government has offered funding for the project, Bruce said. Now the foundation is waiting to hear whether the federal government will match the \$7.5 million the province is willing to put up.

"There's been good discussions going with offices back east in Ottawa," Bruce said. "Most of it's all done through the Association of Vancouver Island and Coastal Communities. So we're pretty optimistic, but we haven't got that word [from Ottawa] yet. We need that word."

Removing the Dayliners from the Island sends the wrong message, said Hill, who is also director of the foundation.

"I am a bit concerned about the signal that this sends - taking the cars off the Island before that \$7.5 million is in place. I think we've got a communications problem," Hill said.

"This is not the time to pull the last spike out of Vancouver Island. It was the railways that built Canada. It is the railways that will keep us going."

While Via has given only oral assurance of its intention to return service to Vancouver Island, the Nanaimo Train Station Partnership reports on their website that the independent federal Crown corporation has committed \$869,000 to complete the renovation of the E&N train station in Nanaimo.

Andre Sullivan, former president of Young Professionals of Nanaimo - which helped raise \$420,000 for the train station during his tenure - said rail service needs to be seriously considered, if only to provide a means to travel between Victoria and communities to the north that avoids the Malahat highway.

"When you see the [latest] accident on the Malahat [the Oct. 29 collision in which motorcyclist Colin Grant, 54, was killed and traffic was backed up for hours], it becomes so obvious that we need a secondary link," Sullivan said.

He added that it would be in the taxpayers' best interest to take the "\$7.5-million, easy route out" and fix the railway instead of spending \$1 billion on a major refurbishing of the Malahat highway.

Hill said there is a demand for updated Dayliners, and hopes to see the introduction of passenger cars that would be "living rooms on wheels."

"If you're travelling from here to Victoria for business, and you have Wi-Fi and coffee and you're relaxed in that space, you have a very different mindset of travelling and connecting communities than if you are sitting around and driving, and pounding and pouring carbon out of the back of the car," Hill said.

If the full \$15 million materializes, the Island Corridor Foundation would be able to replace 104,000 decaying railway ties between Courtenay and Victoria.

That translates to one in three of the existing ties, Bruce explained.

With many engineering assessments already completed, the foundation now has a better idea of the corridor's potential. That itself is a step toward bringing a new set of Via Dayliners to Vancouver Island, Bruce said.

"It's a real improvement. They're going to be first-class. They're hopeful that we'll be ready by mid-spring. And we're hoping that if we get everything together, then we'll be ready for when the Nanaimo train station will open."

If all goes well, Hill's "living rooms on wheels" could become a reality next year.

Spokesmen for Via Rail could not be reached for comment.

- Nanaimo Daily News

ckoehn@nanaimodailynews.com

© Copyright (c) The Victoria Times Colonist

Length: 678 words

Permalink: [www.timescolonist.com...»](http://www.timescolonist.com...)