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Mike De Souza

VIA offers few details on plans to spend hundreds of millions in federal cash

Senior government officials say that rail commuters can expect some quicker trips in Central Canada and renovated stations across the country because of a multimillion-dollar injection of new cash for VIA Rail outlined in the last federal budget.

But nearly a month after the Harper government announced the \$407 million in new funding, the Crown corporation in charge of passenger rail service in Canada has not been able to announce a comprehensive outline of how the money will be spent.

"I don't have the plan right now to show to people," said VIA Rail spokeswoman Nadia Seraiocco in an interview. "In the next few weeks, our president will talk to us, probably about ... highlights of the plan so that journalists can have a better idea, and the general population, of what's going on in terms of the investment."

She indicated that the corporation already outlined some of its needs, which will include repairs or upgrades to passenger cars.

The deputy minister of Transport Canada, Louis Ranger, has said that part of the money would be used to build a third track in areas between Montreal, Toronto and Ottawa, to alleviate traffic congestion between freight and commuter trains travelling on these routes.

"We can ask the corporation to report back on where that money is going. We know exactly where it's going," Ranger told a parliamentary committee in an exchange with opposition transport critic Joe Volpe on Feb. 10.

"They have told us they will increase the traffic by a set amount, and we will monitor them against that. We will be pleased to provide you with a breakdown of where that money is going."

But Volpe said he hasn't received any new details since that meeting, and is concerned the government is giving off "mixed signals" by musing at the same time about privatizing a series of assets, including VIA Rail.

"They (VIA Rail) are waiting for political direction and the political direction is confused to say the least," Volpe said in an interview. "When people are asking them for a plan, they don't have an answer. I think it's time that the Canadian public demanded (answers to) some of those questions. ... It's absolutely unacceptable."

A spokesperson for Conservative MP Rob Merrifield, the junior minister responsible for VIA Rail, said that some of the investments would also go toward upgrading train stations in Windsor, Montreal, Ottawa and Vancouver, but referred other questions about the plan to the Crown corporation.