



Ottawa Halts Vancouver Train

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As if ignoring high-speed and discouraging US rail investment were not enough, the Harper government now blocks even slow-speed rail. Third of four.

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Joe Zaccaria is a regular on the Amtrak to Seattle.

"I have not driven to Seattle or Portland for the past three years," he said. "And I go there extensively. I'm in Seattle at least twice a month, if not four times a month."

But Zaccaria doesn't board the train in Vancouver.

"Service from Vancouver is a nightmare," he said. "It seems like half the time, no trains even show up. You pay for a train ticket, then get put on a bus."

So Zaccaria, a security consultant who lives in the Fraser Valley, drives across the border to Bellingham, Washington, and boards a southbound train at 8:35 a.m. He can meet with clients all day in Seattle, have dinner, and be back in Bellingham by 9:05 p.m.

That's not an option when travelling from Vancouver, which is served by only one train per day. When it runs at all, Amtrak's lone Vancouver-to-Seattle train departs at 5:45 p.m. -- a schedule that eliminates the prospect of a day trip.

Amtrak has fought for years to bring that second train -- which departs in the morning -- to Vancouver. It almost happened last fall, after the province of British Columbia built a new rail siding in Delta. But then the Government of Canada stepped forward, and literally prevented Amtrak from crossing the border.

B.C. ponies up money for track

As The Tyee reported [Wednesday](#), Washington State has spent 16 years -- and hundreds of millions of dollars -- gradually improving passenger rail service along the corridor between Eugene, Oregon, and Vancouver, British Columbia. And as reported [yesterday](#), the government of British Columbia was largely unsupportive through most of those years.

But in March of 2007, the B.C. Liberal government agreed to split the cost of the minimum track upgrade required to bring a second slow-speed Amtrak train to Vancouver.

"This project will boost tourism dollars, reduce traffic congestion, and ease vehicle emissions on our major transportation corridors and at our border crossings," Transportation Minister Kevin Falcon said in a 2007 press release announcing the agreement.

The province put up \$4.5 million toward the construction of a new rail siding near Colebrook Road in Delta, with Amtrak and the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway sharing the balance of the cost. The siding is basically a three-kilometer-long passing track that will allow one train to stand aside so another can pass. With the siding in place, Amtrak planned to continue to extend to Vancouver the additional *Cascades* service already running to Bellingham.

"The siding was completed last year and the second Seattle-to-Vancouver train was supposed to start running in August 2008," explained Vicki Sheehan, a spokesperson for the Washington State Department of Transportation.

"Then, at the last second, concerns were raised by the Canadian Border Services Agency," she said. "That's what's holding up the second train."

'Pennywise and pound foolish'

The Canadian Border Services Agency demanded that Amtrak reimburse the agency for the cost of providing another shift of customs inspectors in Vancouver.

The border agency cited its cost as \$1,500 a day, or more than a half million dollars a year. The CBSA refused The Tyee's request for an interview on this subject.

But Ujjal Dosanjh had plenty to say about the agency's demand. The former premier and current MP for Vancouver-South is lobbying the Harper cabinet to waive the fees.

"The government is being pennywise and pound foolish," Dosanjh told The Tyee.

"Tourists spend money. This one train would bring an estimated \$33 million a year worth of spending to Vancouver. And that does not include the long-term advantages of making it easier for Canadian business people to travel to Seattle and Portland," he explained.

"I understand that rules may have been made years ago, and that we were going to charge recovery fees -- which is what government is going now-a-days, trying to recover costs from the institution being served," Dosanjh continued. "But to let a half-million dollar levy deprive British Columbia of \$33 million in spending? I think in this particular case it just doesn't make sense. It's asinine."

Dosanjh, a Liberal, blamed B.C.'s Conservative MPs for ignoring the problem. "No one from British Columbia is telling Peter van Loan to get his bureaucrats to back off," he said. "The Government is asleep at the switch."

"I would urge Premier Campbell to actually not only pay attention to this, but also prod the federal government to pay attention to this on behalf of British Columbia," he added. "The Obama administration is prepared to spend billions of dollars, and we should take advantage of that."

Part of a larger pattern?

Dosanjh spoke of the border agency's interference as if it were a simple snafu, a mistake to be remedied quickly.

But railway advocates view the incident as merely the latest example of the Government of Canada's longstanding pattern of undermining passenger rail travel. Rail historian Christopher Greenlaw points to Canada's "insincere flirtation" with high-speed rail as a prime example.

Canada's habit of purporting to support passenger rail improvements while quietly stalling them is also the subject of a report in the June edition of *The Walrus*, entitled, "[Off the Rails](#): How Canada fell from leader to laggard in high-speed rail, and why that needs to change."

The restoration of rapid passenger rail service to the corridor between Quebec City and Windsor, for example, has been the subject of sixteen studies since 1973 -- seventeen, if you count the one launched in February of this year. Meanwhile Bombardier, which once built cutting-edge high-speed trains at Montreal Locomotive Works, has relocated its rail division to Europe. The iconic Canadian company now builds high-speed rail systems in every corner of the globe -- except for Canada.

Joe Volpe is the Official Opposition Transport Critic, and part of a Parliamentary committee that has recently been reconsidering the re-establishment of high-speed rail. The Liberal MP said things will be different this time.

"As you know, this thing has been studied to death," Volpe told *The Tyee*. However, "the economic conditions in which we find ourselves really make it much more propitious for us to consider this today."

In addition to the need for long-term stimulus investment, Volpe said political leaders are lining up behind the idea.

"Michael Ignatieff has come out very vigorously, openly, for passenger rail," he said. "The premier of Ontario and the premier of Quebec both want to do this," he added. "Even our own committee, which until about a month or so ago seemed to be rather dissident about it, is today much more enthusiastic."

'It's about the economy, stupid'

Amtrak regular Joe Zaccaria laughed when told why his Bellingham train does not roll across the border to Vancouver.

"It amazes me," he said. "We have all this know-how in North America, and yet the Third World does a better job of facilitating customs. They collect your passport at the beginning of the trip. At the end of the trip you are handed your passport with a visa stamped in it. And they do entry *and* exit enforcement."

Zaccaria's experiences aboard the Amtrak *Cascades* have been part of what lead him to help form a citizens' group called [South Fraser OnTrax](#), which is lobbying for the creation of light rail and the restoration of streetcar service in the Fraser Valley.

"When I started riding the *Cascades* three years ago, it was dead during the week and really active on the weekends. Now the ridership has exploded. Sometimes I've got to book three days ahead of time to be able to get on the train," he said.

The relative ease of travel to Seattle has cut Vancouver out of his life.

"I go to Seattle far more often now," he said. "If I get to Vancouver once every six months, that's too much for me, because I just hate that commute. To go to Vancouver, I've got to get up at like four o'clock just to beat the traffic... I can make more money in Seattle, and it's a much easier commute."

Zaccaria suggested Vancouver will continue to lose business until the Government of Canada gets on board.

"I see all these business connections between Vancouver and Seattle and you've got to shake your head and wonder why we haven't done this 20 years ago," he said.

"It's about the economy, stupid. What part of that does Ottawa not get?"

On Monday, The Fix: A new rail corridor from Vancouver to Langley could serve both Fraser Valley residents and Seattle-bound passengers for less than the cost of doing the two projects separately.

An hour later, the TurboTrain slammed into a truck. The hapless meat man survived. Canada's efforts to develop modern passenger rail service did not. Four decades later, we remain the sole G8 nation without high-speed rail.

-- From "Off the Rails: How Canada fell from leader to laggard in high-speed rail, and why that needs to change" by Monte Paulsen in the [June issue of The Walrus](#).

[Monte Paulsen](#) is investigative editor of The Tyee. He is also the author of a cover story in the June issue of The Walrus, entitled, "[Off the Rails](#): How Canada fell from leader to laggard in high-speed rail, and why that needs to change"