

Liberals set sights on high-speed rail

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Harris MacLeod

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Despite the \$55.9-billion federal deficit, a plan to bring high-speed rail to Canada will be part of the Liberal Party's election platform, according to Liberal transport critic Joe Volpe.

High-speed rail, meaning trains travelling at speeds of at least 200 km per hour, has been talked about in Canada since the early 1990s, and has spawned several feasibility studies. The latest one is set to be released this year and was funded by the provincial governments of Quebec and Ontario, along with the federal government, on the possibility of developing the Québec City-Windsor corridor. Other corridors have also been discussed, including one linking Edmonton and Calgary, a line connecting the Golden Horseshoe region of southern Ontario, and others, but the main roadblock has been the exorbitant cost of developing high-speed rail.

The most recent feasibility study, completed in 1995, on the Québec City-Windsor corridor, which would also link Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto, estimated the cost to be \$18-billion over 10 years. But Mr. Volpe (Eglinton-Lawrence, Ont.) said high-speed rail is an investment in the future, which will bear fruit as it's being constructed by creating jobs and stimulating Canada's manufacturing sector, as well as spurring development in the urban hubs the high-speed rail line would service.

Mr. Volpe also thinks it's the kind of proposal that voters would support.

"As we get closer to an election you will hear more about it," he said, noting his leader, Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke-Lakeshore, Ont.) has expressed his support for the project in the past.

"There's really one leader in Canada that's onto high speed rail. ... Even the Americans are beginning to follow through on this and now there is leadership in North American on doing something on high-speed rail, but it's too bad that leadership is in the United States and not in the Prime Minister's office."

Ekos pollster Frank Graves, who testified before the House of Commons Transport Committee last year, conducted a study on the level of support for high-speed rail among Canadians. He was surprised at both the public's level of awareness, as well as their overwhelming support for the project, with 62 per cent of respondents strongly in support of high-speed rail.

"The support levels were remarkably robust," said Mr. Graves. "[Support for high-speed rail] was really overwhelmingly stable considering we mentioned this would be multi-billions of dollars. The reason for that is that people see the most attractive reason for doing high-speed rail as being grounded in the economic benefits, both short term from the stimulatory effects of massive investment, but even more importantly what they see as the long term benefits of having this clean, safe, modern, fast technology connecting the major economic centres, not just in Canada but in upper North America."

He noted the poll was conducted in September when people were more pessimistic about the state of the economy than they are now, and yet enthusiasm for high-speed rail was still high.

Mr. Ignatieff has said in the past that high-speed rail, particularly a line that links Quebec with the rest of Canada, could be good for national unity. Mr. Graves said he believes it would be popular in Quebec, as well as with younger voters. Recently the Liberal leader said if he was elected he would implement a national childcare program, however Mr. Graves said politically high-speed rail is more of a sure thing.

"I've tested at some length over the years on childcare, and I've tested this issue, and I'd sure have [high-speed rail] in the window instead of childcare if I were them," he said.

Bruce Burrows, vice-president of public and corporate affairs for the Railway Association of Canada, said development of high-speed rail can be done in stages of investment. For instance, the Obama administration recently committed \$8-billion to developing high-speed rail lines, which will go to feasibility studies, land banking for future corridor use, identifying corridors, and determining the engineering capacity needed to bring a high-speed rail project to fruition.

"We're very keen that the government get going on those things and we're obviously anxiously looking forward to the results of the study on the Eastern Canadian corridor," he said.

Mr. Burrows noted that while Canada has some of the lowest rates of commuter rail use, it is a leader in transporting freight and the intermodal business, whereby trains interface with trucks and ships to transport cargo from ports into the interior, is the fastest growing part of the rail sector in Canada. One downside to this, however, is that high-speed rail cannot share track with freight trains.

But he said there are huge socio-economic benefits to developing high-speed rail in Canada, which would increase the "fluidity" between the country's major urban centres, reduce congestion on roads, and of course trains are among the least emissions intensive forms of

transportation. Additionally, Mr. Burrows said Canadian companies, such as Quebec-based Bombardier, are well positioned to play a major role in the development of high-speed rail in Canada.

"Canada has world-class rail expertise in engineering, track, signaling, locomotive and car design. The development of HSR is a tremendous opportunity to showcase made-in-Canada know how and innovation [and] could be a game changer in connecting major urban centres."

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