

High-Speed Rail Freedom of Information: Review of Responses

Executive Summary, August 15, 2018

Background

Since the initial announcement of plans for high-speed rail (HSR) in southwestern Ontario in 2014 by Glenn Murray, then Provincial Transport Minister, members of InterCityRail's Steering Committee have been closely monitoring the province's public communications on the project. In January 2018, following meetings of concerned citizens, InterCity Rail was established to determine the implications of HSR and subsequently to challenge the government's decision to implement HSR.

What is InterCityRail?

Various local groups and individuals have joined together to form InterCityRail, an advocacy organization that promotes evidence-based solutions for improved, reliable and affordable passenger rail transportation in southwestern Ontario. InterCityRail is a non-profit, non-partisan advocacy group focused on the facts behind the HSR project including the currently restricted Environmental Assessment (EA) process. Our steering committee comprises representatives of Ontario's agricultural community, municipal representatives and others. Our web site (www.intercityrail.org) is the repository of our work and is an open public resource. We hold and attend public and municipal meetings to educate concerned citizens and institutions on important issues related to HSR and alternatives.

Our Relations with the Provincial Government

In general, the previous government, under then Premier Kathleen Wynne, including its Special Advisor on High Speed Rail, was reluctant to engage with us directly. This differed from our relationship with the HSR EA team at the Ministry of Transportation (MTO). Dialogue with MTO has always been constructive and respectful, and information was exchanged that was both in the public interest and domain. It was clear that the MTO team was committed to producing a very professional set of Terms of Reference for the current single-focus EA.

Key Issues

- The First Class Partnership study that initiated the HSR project in 2014 was erroneous, both technically and financially, and misleading. The government opted not to engage expert critique on this study and proceeded to further stages.
- Based on additional facilitating studies produced by other professional counsel, the government continued to understate the financial and technical realities of the project. It did not seek input from the municipalities or the public during the process.
- No data exists in these studies to justify HSR as a viable solution to our transportation needs now and in the foreseeable future.
- Best practices in other countries with extensive HSR experience were ignored by the government.
- The stakeholder consultation process specifically excluded the southwestern Ontario agricultural community, which would incur devastating cost burdens if the planned greenfield right of way was constructed across their lands between Kitchener and London. It also failed to mention urban property expropriation and demolition.
- Although existing, upgradable passenger rail routes paralleled the proposed HSR route, no consideration was given to improving service on those routes in the \$15m EA process that was launched in March 2018. The EA is restricted to the new HSR route, which violates traditional EA practice that gives consideration to all options.
- InterCityRail's prime objective at this time is to have the government expand the current EA to look at all the options for improved, fast, frequent passenger rail service in southwestern Ontario.

Results

The responses provided by MTO through our Freedom of Information Request (FIR) indicated a very limited pool of HSR knowledge within the province, and external counsel reports that were incomplete and limited in scope. Notably, there was a complete absence of studies on collateral social and economic costs, and the grassroots demand for HSR services in southwestern Ontario. A detailed analysis of the FIR responses is attached for additional reference.

Conclusion

Plans for HSR in southwestern Ontario have no economic or social basis, especially given the budget of \$5 billion for the Kitchener to London section. In fact, as currently presented by the province, it is a massive taxpayer liability with undetermined collateral and opportunity costs.

Recommendation

InterCityRail recommends expanding the current EA to consider all the options for improved, fast, frequent passenger rail service in southwestern Ontario.

Respectfully submitted,

InterCityRail Steering Committee