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Chair: Mr. Peter Schiefke



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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Peter Schiefke (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 131 of the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities.

Before we start the meeting, I'd like to remind all in-person participants to read the best practices guidelines on the cards on the table. These measures are in place to protect the health and safety of all participants.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Friday, September 6, 2024, the committee is resuming its study of passenger rail service and the Via Rail Canada incident of August 31, 2024.

I'd now like to welcome our witnesses.

Appearing today, we have the Honourable Anita Anand, Minister of Transport. From the Department of Transport, we also have Arun Thangaraj, deputy minister; Lisa Setlakwe, assistant deputy minister, safety and security; and Craig Hutton, associate assistant deputy minister, policy.

Minister, we're going to give you five minutes for your opening remarks. The floor is yours.

[Translation]

Hon. Anita Anand (Minister of Transport): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to committee members for giving me the opportunity to participate in this important discussion on the unacceptable treatment of passengers on Via Rail train 622 during the incident that occurred on Labour Day weekend.

I am pleased to have officials from Transport Canada with me today, and I want to thank you for introducing them to the committee, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Mr. Chair, like many Canadians, I was shocked to hear about the treatment of the Via Rail passengers who were stranded for more than 10 hours on a train between Drummondville and Quebec City. Passengers had to endure physical and psychological discomfort for hours. Some described the situation like being in prison. Some said they no longer felt safe.

This is completely unacceptable, Mr. Chair. This situation is frustrating and disappointing. There is always the possibility of delays when travelling, but Via Rail has a responsibility to passengers' health and well-being when things like this happen. Simply put, passengers deserved much better treatment on August 31.

[Translation]

I was told that the train had experienced a mechanical failure and that it is now being investigated by Via Rail. However, a mechanical failure absolutely does not mean that the passengers should have been stuck in the train for ten hours with limited access to essential services like food, water and working toilets.

• (1535)

[English]

That's why my predecessor stepped in and met with Via Rail executives about this unacceptable incident to demand answers. Immediately after the incident, we demanded that Via Rail take concrete steps and report back to us to ensure this type of thing does not happen again.

Simply put, Via Rail has to improve employee training so its service crew is well equipped to respond to all kinds of situations. They have to do better—provide updates to passengers on their trains more frequently so they know what's going on, and review procedures for incidents like these when a train breaks down, so that passengers receive a basic standard of care and are treated with dignity. For example, if you get stuck on a train for 10 hours, you should always have access to a functioning toilet. However, you shouldn't be stuck on a train for 10 hours to begin with.

We also requested that Via Rail provide us with a robust, updated emergency management action plan, and we asked to receive that in 30 days. At our request, Via Rail have improved the way they respond to situations like these, but we have yet to receive their revised action plan.

Via Rail are independent. They're responsible for determining operational issues related to their network. They need to have alternate travel options available in case of disruptions, which obviously must be provided before the situation escalates into a 10-hour ordeal.

Passenger rail is a critical link for Canadian communities. Via Rail plays an important role in helping to connect people across this country, including those in indigenous and remote communities. We will keep demanding that they provide a reliable rail service that meets the needs of all Canadians.

I am pushing Via Rail to ensure that passengers are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

[*Translation*]

One of our government's priorities is to reduce service delays and interruptions, while ensuring travellers' safety and protecting their rights.

[*English*]

We need Via to do better.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for those opening remarks, Minister.

We begin our line of questioning today with Mr. Lawrence.

Mr. Lawrence, the floor is yours. You have six minutes, sir.

Mr. Philip Lawrence (Northumberland—Peterborough South, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for appearing today. Congratulations on your new appointment.

I have some serious concerns, though, because after nine years we've seen some pretty significant failures with the transportation files: Canadian passengers have been stranded in airports and trains for hours, even days on end; labour disruptions have put our economy at peril at our ports, railways and airlines; and costs—the cost of air travel and freight—have gone up. At a time when Canadians are facing a record affordability crisis, there are more and higher costs coming from the transportation file.

Minister, we're a G7 country. There are billions of dollars in economic flows. Millions of passengers are counting on reliable transportation. What message does it send to Canadians and, in fact, the rest of the world, that we have only a part-time transport minister?

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, it is absolutely insulting to hear the Conservatives refer to this position, and me personally, as a part-time minister, when in fact the Conservatives themselves did not have a Minister of Transport. Instead they had a minister of many things. There was no stand-alone Minister of Transport, except in one instance: They chose to put that portfolio into an omnibus portfolio—the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure, Communities, Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs—so it is laughable that the opposition is referring to me as a part-time minister when I am executing two portfolios expeditiously, responsibly and with dedication to the people of Canada.

• (1540)

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Thank you, Minister.

To turn to the events in Quebec over the Labour Day weekend, of course we had passengers stuck on a train, as you said in your statement, for over 10 hours. They had limited food and water. We heard from the passengers, workers and union officials that this was, in fact, not an isolated incident. Can you commit that this will be the last time that passengers are stranded on a Via train, with limited food and water, for more than five hours?

Hon. Anita Anand: I start by committing to ensuring that Via Rail has revised protocols so this never happens again. Via Rail is an independent organization, a Crown corporation, so it is operationally separate, but I am demanding better service, better quality, better protocols and better communication plans from Via Rail. In fact, I demanded a third party investigation into the events and an update of its emergency action plan and of the review of employee training.

Therefore, you can see, in the short time that I have been transport minister, that I have been on the phone with the chair and with the CEO of Via Rail, demanding better services for passengers and demanding better for the population of our country.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Thank you, Minister, but I don't think protocols will quite cut it. In fact, all of these words were said after the incident that happened in Cobourg, in my riding, when residents had to sit for hours on a Via train. All of these words were, again, spoken. It happened again in Quebec, so I'm asking here, yes or no, going forward, can you commit today to not stranding passengers for more than five hours on Via Rail?

Hon. Anita Anand: I can commit that Via Rail will do better for their passengers. I can also say that, after the December 2022 incident, Via Rail committed to an action plan that improved the way they handled emergencies with passengers in tow, and it is clear that these policies weren't properly applied during the Labour Day weekend this year. That's why I asked for an updated emergency management plan, a third party investigation and concrete steps to improve communication, and I will ensure that these issues are addressed. Passengers and Canadians deserve better.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Passengers require more than just protocols and action plans. They require results.

Could you give us an outline of how many times your predecessor, former minister Rodriguez, talked to Via Rail, either by email or by phone conversation, in the three months prior to the incident?

Hon. Anita Anand: I will ask my deputy minister to respond to that question.

Mr. Arun Thangaraj (Deputy Minister, Department of Transport): I know that, immediately following this incident, the previous minister did speak with Via Rail. I personally spoke with the chair of Via Rail, as well as the CEO, on this occasion.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: When? In the three months prior, how many times did the former minister talk to Via Rail?

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: I'm not privy to all of the—

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Thank you.

I'd like to actually stop right now, and I'd like to bring a unanimous consent motion—I'm hoping it'll be done very quickly—to have the former minister, Pablo Rodriguez, who's currently a member of Parliament, appear before this committee as part of the Via Rail study.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon (Argenteuil—La Petite-Nation, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

This member is not even letting the witnesses answer his questions. He already has another motion—

Mr. Philip Lawrence: With respect, Mr. Chair, that's not a point of order.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: He didn't answer the question, and he was going to—

Mr. Philip Lawrence: That's not a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lauzon.

We have a motion that was put forward by Mr. Lawrence, which is up for discussion.

● (1545)

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Just for the sake of the interpreters, I think it would be respectful for all parties to be able to ask a question, as well as to give the person to whom we're asking the question the time to respond to the question, and not to, like our colleagues across just recently, jump over and talk over. I have a problem hearing it; I'm virtual today. I ask, Mr. Chair, that you impose this rule because it does disturb my ears when we have people talking over.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Iacono. That's so noted.

I ask all members to please allow proper time for translation, particularly for those who are joining us virtually.

Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate that my colleague, Mr. Lawrence, is bringing this motion forward. I think he's trying to get some very specific information about communication between the former minister and Via Rail.

I appreciate that this incident happened right at the end of his time as minister, so it's understandably difficult for the current minister to provide information on what the former minister was communicating at the time. I don't see it as being out of order.

My concern is that we have the new minister with us. We have a limited amount of time. I have a whole bunch of questions I would love to ask her. I hope that we can dispense with this motion as quickly as possible so that we can get back to the important testimony.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Yes. We would be agreeable to doing that in the second round, at the end of this. That's fine.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. It looks like we're going to push that motion to the second round, so that we have all the time that we can possibly have with the minister.

[*Translation*]

The floor is yours, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval (Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes—Verchères, BQ): I would like to be sure about something. By “in the second round”, we are actually talking about the second hour of the meeting, is that right?

The Chair: Yes, that's right, the second hour of the meeting. Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. Lawrence, your time will restart. You have 25 seconds left, sir.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: That's fine.

Thank you very much, Minister. We appreciate your being here.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lawrence.

[*Translation*]

You have six minutes, Mr. Lauzon.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank the minister for being here today.

In the course of this study, several witnesses have told us about incidents that caused delays. We have also talked with Via Rail, who told us about mechanical and other problems caused by environmental conditions, disruptions on the rails and so on.

Minister, you may be aware that the committee has done a study on high-speed trains. Can you explain how that would change the future of passenger rail transportation and how it might improve things for Via Rail?

Hon. Anita Anand: Thank you for the question.

First, regarding the situation we have discussed and are going to continue discussing, I would like to say that we have to start thinking about Via Rail's long-term objectives now, not just for the future.

Regarding your question, the high-speed train is the major transportation infrastructure project in Canada. We have to think very big for our country. We are a G7 country, and we have to have a transportation system and infrastructure that live up to the public's expectations now and in the future. This is a priority for our government. That is not the case for the opposition.

So what are we going to do? We have heard from suppliers. We are currently looking at three high-frequency, high-speed train projects. A team has studied the procurement options and the bids. We are going to choose a rail transportation system project for Canada and for the future of our country. The benefits this offers for our transportation system are clear, but obviously there will be other benefits as well.

Thank you.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Thank you, Minister.

[*English*]

Railways have been an important part of Canada's history. In fact, Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau made intercity rail service essential across Canada, which established Via Rail. It came from there. It is a Crown corporation and the first national passenger rail company.

How important is it for the government to invest in a service like Via Rail?

• (1550)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anita Anand: Clearly it is. As I have already said, this is not just a transportation issue; it is also an environment and climate change issue.

How can we reduce our carbon emissions? High-frequency, high-speed trains enable us to do that. How can we get more affordable housing close to railway stations? High-frequency, high-speed trains also enable us to do that. So we can see that this will offer opportunities for Canada. We have to be competitive in relation to other countries, certainly, but we also have to be competitive for Canadians. That is what I will be asking Via Rail, now and in the future, about another project: high-frequency, high-speed trains.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Thank you, Minister.

[*English*]

I have a quick question, Minister.

There has been a bit of confusion or misunderstanding about Transport Canada and Via Rail. We all heard it here with Via Rail and Transport Canada.

Can you please share with this committee what the relationship is between you, Minister—or your staff—and Via Rail?

Hon. Anita Anand: Listen, I want to start by stating a very basic fact: Via Rail is a Crown corporation. Via Rail is operationally separate from the Government of Canada. The Government of Canada is the sole shareholder of Via Rail. We can therefore set the broad policy parameters under which Via Rail operates.

However, when there is a situation like the one we are discussing today—outside of Quebec City, for example—

[*Translation*]

It is Via Rail's responsibility to deal with that. I will be asking questions and making sure I get answers. I am going to ask its senior executives what happened and tell them they have to do a better job for this country.

[*English*]

That's what I said on the phone with the CEO and the chair of the board. That was unacceptable, and that has to change.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Lauzon.

Next to speak is Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

The floor is yours for six minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to the committee, Minister.

Congratulations on your new appointment as Minister of Transport.

I do share the concern that was raised earlier, that the Department of Transport and Treasury Board are two very big portfolios, two very big departments. I am actually wondering how you are going to find the time to get this work done properly, but it will be up to you to demonstrate that in how you do your job.

First, since we are discussing Via Rail today, I would like to tell you that I am actually pleasantly surprised to learn that since you were appointed, you have already had an opportunity to speak with Via Rail management.

In my opinion, if there is a reason for the situation that occurred at Via Rail, I put it down to bad management, bad service and service interruptions. I am not blaming you personally; I blame Via Rail management, the way Via Rail is organized.

In addition, if I were to fault the government for something, I would put it down to the fact that it has been so slow to start the process for a dedicated track service like the high-speed train, the high-speed train we are aiming for. There is also the fact that the long-haul fleet is obsolete, and that repeated breakdowns and such long service interruptions, whether we like it or not, are happening repeatedly, and this is of real concern.

Is this situation a matter of concern for you too?

Hon. Anita Anand: Thank you for your question and comments.

I would like to start by saying that I completely agree with you. It is unacceptable for incidents like these to happen, whether once or twice or three times. These kinds of delays are unacceptable.

I have only been the Minister of Transport for three weeks. As you said, I have spoken with members of Via Rail management and I told them that this situation was not acceptable, either now or in future. I asked them what they intended to do now. I told them that I wanted updates, I wanted there to be a communication protocol, and I wanted to see their plan, now, for guaranteeing passengers exceptional service.

• (1555)

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you for your answer.

However, I would have liked to know what is happening with the dedicated tracks for the much-talked-about HFR, or high-frequency rail, or HSR, high-speed rail. Regarding renewal of the long-haul train fleet, your government made a commitment for both fleets. We shall see, but I do not get the feeling there is any sense of urgency. I do not get the feeling that money has been budgeted for this.

Can you tell us whether changes are soon going to be made in this regard? Like it or not, we would like to see concrete measures, because we don't want to wait until the twelfth of never for it to happen. The long-haul train fleet is reaching its end. It dates from the 1950s. There could be worse than what happened on the rails between Montreal and Toronto. That is what we risk happening there if funds are not invested.

Hon. Anita Anand: Thank you also for those questions.

[*English*]

We actually have invested in new trains in the corridor, which are entering into service right now.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: I am talking about the long-haul train fleet, Minister, not the fleet between Montreal and Toronto.

[*English*]

Hon. Anita Anand: We have announced an investment in new cars. We are in the pre-procurement stage with those cars. I want to stress that our investments from 2021 through to 2024 have been in the millions of dollars, because we believe in rail service. We believe in renewing the fleet. That includes, in budget 2024, funding for a new fleet.

I'll ask my deputy minister to provide further details.

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: As the minister said, in 2018 Via Rail announced that Siemens had obtained a contract for the purchase of new locomotives and rolling stock, which are currently in service—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you. I understand, but you are still talking about the fleet between Montreal and Toronto. There are no figures. There are no amounts budgeted for the long-haul train fleet. You have barely started the procurement process, when these cars are 50 years old.

I don't have a lot of time left, so I am going to ask a different question.

My question is still about the rails, but actually about another type of rail.

Whenever your predecessor, Mr. Pablo Rodriguez, testified at this committee, I asked him whether the money for studies on the tramway between Ottawa and Gatineau was going to be allocated. Each time, he told me he was anxious to see the project, the money was coming, maybe even tomorrow morning, we were going to see the money soon.

Today, here you are, and we have been told since 2019 that the money was coming, but it still hasn't got here.

Can you tell us, Minister, maybe today, whether the money is going to get here tomorrow morning, or is going to get here today? When are you going to announce the money for the studies on the tramway to Gatineau? There is even a member from Outaouais here, around the table. I am sure he would be happy to hear it.

Hon. Anita Anand: First, this is a priority for our government. It is a subject that involves the Minister of Housing, Infrastructure and Communities.

My deputy minister will undoubtedly be able to expand on the answer.

[*English*]

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: That was the answer. We'll work with our colleagues at Infrastructure Canada on the funding for the study.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[*English*]

Next we have Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is now yours for six minutes, sir.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Minister. Congratulations on your new role. It's good to have you here speaking about this very important situation that happened with Via Rail.

I wanted to take a moment to introduce Leila Dance, our wonderful new member of Parliament for Elmwood—Transcona in Manitoba. We're delighted to have her on board. We take trains so seriously that we're going to send twice as many people to committee. Even though that's only two, it's still a 100% increase.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Minister, you talked about Via Rail staff and your demands of them and your expectations. We had a passenger at a previous meeting who was on that train, and he told us about his experience during those 10 hours. It was very challenging; it was difficult; people were anxious and concerned. He also talked about the skill and competence of the Via Rail staff. I ride the train as much as I can, and my experience has been that they've been caring and competent and professional, so I wanted to start my remarks just by thanking Via Rail's staff. I know they do an incredible job with limited resources.

We talked a bit about training when we had the representatives from Unifor here. I know that a lot of your government's response to Via was about how they need to do better training. The union doesn't think that's the problem. They think the problem is that they're trying to do a professional job with limited resources.

If, in the wake of this investigation you're holding, it comes out that Via Rail actually needs more resources from your government so that it can be more resilient, will you provide those resources to Via Rail?

• (1600)

Hon. Anita Anand: I want to begin by saying that resources have been a question that we, as a government, have focused on. That's why we're ensuring that we have investments in Via Rail over the course of numerous years...2021, \$490 million; 2022, \$354 million; 2023, \$210 million; 2024, funding for a new fleet.

You can see from that that we, as a government, take this file and Via Rail very seriously. We also take the importance of service delivery seriously, but, of course, because Via Rail is operationally separate, we need to see that third party report to find out why this train experienced the mechanical failure that it did.

Apart from that, I said in my calls to Via Rail's CEO and the chair of the board that it is unacceptable for a train to be on the tracks for 10 hours with not enough food, not enough water, not working toilets. That's not a labour-intensive issue. That is a practice that they can put in place regardless of the actual training that the labourers or the employees have. If there's a request for more funding, we will consider it, but there are things that Via Rail can do right now to make sure that this situation doesn't happen again.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Minister, I wonder if after the 2022 incident... This is the second time we've had a train break down and strand passengers. We heard a very similar message after the December 2022 incident. Was improved training one of the directives provided by the minister after that incident?

Hon. Anita Anand: Yes. The processes were in place, but they weren't followed in 2024. Management, crew, employees will take more training. There's ongoing testing of response plans. That has already started. That's going to help us understand how well those plans are working. That's the operational level at Via Rail.

From a ministerial level and the Government of Canada level, we have a responsibility to demand better of that Crown corporation, and that's exactly what I'm doing here today.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Minister, you've talked about HFR and your plan for improved dedicated passenger rail between Toronto and Quebec City. That's Canada's most populous corridor.

I think building that infrastructure is something that we strongly support, in principle. We want to see it done publicly and in the public interest, not for private profit.

However, we haven't heard your government's vision for passenger transportation in rural Canada. It's been years now since Greyhound terminated its service in Canada, leaving hundreds of communities across the country without affordable passenger transportation options. Via Rail service in rural Canada is extremely limited and challenged by the fact that it shares the tracks with the major freight companies.

I think people in rural Canada today have fewer passenger transportation options than they have had in a hundred years.

What is your vision for passenger transportation in rural Canada? What are you willing to do as a government to ensure that rural Canadians have the options they deserve?

Hon. Anita Anand: Thank you for that question also.

I come from rural Canada. I was born in Kentville, Nova Scotia. It is in the middle of the Annapolis Valley. We depended on different types of transportation to get around, so your questions about rural are very well taken and I appreciate them.

Let's say that Canada has a challenging geography that we as a department and as a government need to address. That is making sure that there is adequate rail, bus and transportation to access remote communities.

I have seen my honourable colleague, Mr. Chair, in a canoe in British Columbia.

• (1605)

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Hopefully that's not the government's vision.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Hon. Anita Anand: I would like to say that we have to ensure that we are being innovative. That's why high-speed, high-frequency rail is just one facet of what we are considering for the future of this country.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. Thank you very much, Mr. Bachrach.

Next, we'll go to Mr. Muys.

The floor is yours for five minutes, sir.

Mr. Dan Muys (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Congratulations on your appointment to this portfolio and welcome to committee.

I've been on this committee since the beginning of this Parliament. We've seen a lot of travel chaos in that time. When we talk about the previous Via incident in Cobourg in December 2022, we had the then-CEO of Via here before committee. I asked him whether he had heard from the then minister, your predecessor's predecessor, at the time of that and thereafter, and he had not. The answer was no.

That same holiday season, we had quite a chaos at the airports in Canada, where people were sleeping on floors and people were stranded in foreign countries. We had the heads of the airport authorities for the three largest airports in the country. We asked them if they had heard from the then minister. The answer was no.

I want to ask and give you the opportunity to respond and tell us how it will be different with you. Obviously, all of these messes have existed and the minister has been missing in action.

I would imagine that during a time of trouble and chaos, the minister would be at the command centre at Transport Canada, with all hands on deck, sleeves rolled up and getting the job done.

You have admitted that it's two big portfolios that you have. How will it be different?

Hon. Anita Anand: I'll tell you how it's going to be different. I've already spoken with all the airline CEOs and the rail CEOs, including the Via chair of the board and the Via CEO. That's how seriously I take this job. That's how seriously I will continue to work on behalf of the Canadian population, which needs rail service in order for us to have economic prosperity in this country, in order for us to get to work on time, in order for us to reduce carbon emissions, and in order for us to think big about what is possible in terms of connectivity in this country.

I deeply resent the implication that I am not on top of this file. The opposite is true, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Dan Muys: Thank you.

I didn't make that implication. I asked for your perspective on how you would be different.

Switching gears to airport delays, we heard from a witness at this very committee last week who said that he plans a six- to eight-hour buffer to get from his home to the Dorval airport in advance of his flight, just because of the delays at airports. Airports are federally regulated, and we know there have been a number of issues. We've heard about that. The level of airport delays is unprecedented.

We've seen these problems not just at the three or four large airports in the country but at the smaller airports. We've had a study at this committee about northern airports. There are a number of issues in the air sector.

Again, what are you doing to address that issue that's very directly impacting Canadians?

Hon. Anita Anand: I agree we need to have—

Ms. Annie Koutrakis (Vimy, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I'm sorry, Minister.

The Chair: We'll stop your clock, Mr. Muys. You have three minutes and 30 seconds.

Yes, Ms. Koutrakis.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: I'm questioning the relevance of the question from my colleague. It pertains to the air sector, but the minister is here before us on a specific issue with Via Rail.

I'm questioning the relevance.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: He's basing the point of order on the passenger testimony we received, Ms. Koutrakis, so it's within....

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Koutrakis.

The minister is appearing before us today to address the incident that occurred on August 31. There is a link with what one of the witnesses said, so I'll let the minister respond.

However, I want to say this, colleagues: We specifically invited the minister here to discuss that incident because we felt it was important enough to use the committee's time to address it. We have the minister before us.

Minister, the floor is yours. You have three minutes and 30 seconds.

• (1610)

Hon. Anita Anand: Thank you. I hope I'll have time to respond to this question.

The first point I want to say is that I agree that delays are unacceptable. Delays are the responsibility not only of the airlines but also of the airports and airport authorities. We have to make sure that each one of them is carrying their weight. In my conversations with the airlines and airport authorities thus far, as well as with the airports, I have stressed the need to reduce delays. That has to happen. Post COVID, we need to see the airline sector functioning more efficiently.

What are we doing? We are working with airports, airlines and airport authorities on a regular basis to make sure we're addressing the bottlenecks. They are doing whatever is within their sphere. We are ensuring airports are sharing data to ensure better planning and traveller experience.

This is an issue that I'm glad my honourable colleague raised, and I'll continue to stay on top of it.

Mr. Dan Muys: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Muys. Thank you, Minister Anand.

Next, we'll go to Ms. Koutrakis.

Ms. Koutrakis, the floor is yours. You have five minutes.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Minister, and congratulations on your new function. I always say that if you want to see results, give more work to the people who are very organized. Give it to the busiest people and they will definitely come through with flying colours. I have to tell you, Minister Anand, as a woman MP, I couldn't be prouder to have you as our Minister of Transport. I think you're breaking the ceiling for many young women and girls watching you here today.

Having said that, we know your predecessor sent a letter to Via Rail on September 4, 2024. In his letter, he asked for a certain response within 30 days.

Do you know whether Via Rail respected the 30-day timeline, and did they come back with their action plan?

Hon. Anita Anand: First of all, thank you very much for those kind words. I hadn't thought of that.

I'll move on to your question.

Let me just say that Via Rail was asked by my predecessor to conduct a third party investigation, review the emergency management action plan within 30 days, review training received by management and employees, review the communications with passengers, review and improve communication protocols and assess mechanical failures. I have spoken with the chair and the CEO of Via Rail. We have received an update from them in response to that letter, so some steps have been taken, which I'll elaborate on.

As of September 3, 2024, Via Rail implemented a new escalation protocol for its staff on board trains and its operations control centre. That protocol ensures that Transport Canada is immediately informed of disruptive events and that, if a delay is over two hours, Via Rail begins arranging alternative transportation options for passengers, like buses. In addition, Via Rail executives and employees who are responsible for operations have participated in in-person training sessions that took place in September, and these sessions were focused on emergency and crisis management plans. Via Rail has also commissioned two independent reports, one on understanding operational gaps that led to the incident and the other on mechanical failures. Both will be delivered by the end of November.

On October 7, Via Rail conducted a tabletop simulation test to ensure that its crisis communication plan was in order. That tested emergency activation and response. Another is planned in November.

Lastly, I'll just say that I have instructed Via to make changes to its communication protocol to ensure a timely explanation.

I want to summarize by saying that what took place on October 31 was unacceptable. My predecessor sent a list of demands. I have followed up with a phone call and now have received a response from Via Rail in terms of what it is doing and what it will come back with, for example, at the end of November. We still have not received an emergency action plan that provides a comprehensive play-by-play of how Via Rail will address some of the issues.

I want to say that I have given you an update of what Via Rail has done, but I'm not speaking for Via Rail. Via Rail is a Crown corporation. It is separately operated, and it is accountable. It needs to come and tell this committee and the House of Commons what it is doing and what it has done.

• (1615)

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Thank you for that, Minister.

You know, in my previous life, before becoming a member of Parliament, I used to lead teams in the financial industry. At the beginning of the year, we used to put down objectives and what action plan we would put in place to make sure that they achieved results. Through your conversations with your department and also with Via Rail, do you feel confident that what Via Rail says it will be doing it will achieve results on? If it doesn't, what do you see as perhaps being some consequences?

Hon. Anita Anand: That is exactly why I wanted to speak with the CEO and the chair of the board, and I asked for separate calls. I wanted to speak with them separately, because they occupy separate roles in the corporation.

Every time there is a new chair, we put forward a letter of expectation, and the board has to hold executives accountable. That's why I wanted to speak with the chair of Via Rail alone—because that is the role of the board and specifically the chair of the board—and that was the subject of our conversation. After that call, I then spoke with the CEO and emphasized the need for an implementation plan for all of the demands in Mr. Rodriguez's letter to them just after the incident occurred.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Minister.

Thank you, Ms. Koutrakis.

[*Translation*]

The floor is yours for two and a half minutes, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, you said just now that since being appointed, you had had the opportunity to speak with all of the managements of the airline companies in Canada. I would like to talk to you about Air Transat in particular.

It is a well-known fact that Air Transat has been renegotiating its pandemic debt with the government for a year now. During the pandemic, the company needed financing and it was given assistance. Unlike Air Canada, Air Transat was not given preferential treatment, and so Air Transat—

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: —received money in the form of debt, rather than receiving money in the form of equity.

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Barsalou-Duval. I am going to stop you here to hear a point of order. You have got to 42 seconds.

The floor is yours, Mr. Lauzon.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Mr. Chair, earlier we could see a connection with the airline companies, since a witness mentioned them, but the Bloc Québécois member has asked questions relating directly to air transportation, when we are here to talk about Via Rail's problems. I wonder whether it is really appropriate at this time to be asking a question about that. We seem to have gone off topic.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lauzon.

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, I tend to agree with Mr. Lauzon. We invited the minister to ask her questions about the incident that occurred on August 31, and your question is unrelated to that. If you want to ask a question about that incident, you have the floor.

You have two minutes left.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: That's fine. I would like an opportunity to speak about this with the minister at some point. Because she referred to the airline companies, I thought it might be appropriate to pursue that discussion.

Regarding Via Rail more specifically, we see the constant delays that occur. Delays have risen from 16% in 2011 to 27% in 2017 and 41% in 2023. These are the consequences of a chronic lack of investment, for one thing, and the fact that there are no dedicated tracks, for another. The situation is just getting worse, Minister, and your party has been in power for nine years.

On the subject of the HFR, the high-frequency rail, we do not even know yet what it is going to look like, even though this campaign promise has been around for an eternity.

Do you think the current situation results from your government being slow to recognize the situation and make the right decisions?

• (1620)

Hon. Anita Anand: I would like to get a clarification, Mr. Chair.

Are we talking about the HFR or the current situation?

The Chair: Mr. Barsalou-Duval, I will let you ask your question again, and I will give you 20 seconds more so you can clarify it for the minister.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: It won't be easy to say what I said in 20 seconds.

Broadly speaking, Minister, what I said is that the current situation regarding routine delays and service interruptions at Via Rail is a result of your government not making the investments needed, even though you have been in power for nine years.

Do you think your government has failed to make progress on issues that should have progressed a long time ago, including the high-frequency train project?

Hon. Anita Anand: That is not the case.

As I already said, we have invested in our rail network and we will continue to make investments, including in high-speed and high-frequency trains. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[English]

Next we have Mr. Bachrach.

The floor is yours, sir. You have two and a half minutes, please.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I sense my colleague's frustration that we have to constrain this conversation to the incident involving Via Rail. Since we do have a new Minister of Transport, I wonder if I could make a motion to invite the minister back to this committee prior to the Christmas break to more broadly discuss her transportation mandate.

If it's in order, I'll move that motion now.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

To save you the time—I'll also let you start over so that you don't lose your 20 seconds—I'll let you know that there is another invitation on the table. That's why I'm being strict right now. The members have already asked that we invite the minister to come back and answer questions regarding supplementals as well as her mandate letter.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: What's the timing on that appearance, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: I believe it's before the end of October.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Carine Grand-Jean): Yes.

The Chair: That's what's currently on the table, colleagues. That's why I'm being very strict here in trying to make sure that we get the questions answered relating to Via Rail.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: It's by the end of October.

The Chair: Whether or not the minister has the time to do that is another story. What I'm saying is that we have another invitation on the table.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: We're generous with our invitations.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: You can come to committee any time.

Hon. Anita Anand: [*Inaudible—Editor*] the invitations.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Mr. Bachrach, I'll let you start again. You have two and a half minutes from the start, please.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you very much.

Minister, I really welcome the news that your government will be investing in the replacement of Via's long-distance fleet. It will make a huge difference for the sustainability and viability of those critical routes that serve rural Canada and places like the one that I represent in northwest B.C. However, your plan to privatize the corridor between Toronto and Quebec City will starve Via Rail of 95% of its passenger revenue.

Have you been briefed on where that will leave Via Rail as a Crown corporation, as it tries to provide the rest of this huge country with passenger rail service?

[Translation]

Hon. Anita Anand: Thank you for that question.

This is not at all about privatization.

We have opted for a public-private partnership so we have access to experts who have concrete experience with these trains. So this is not at all about privatization. We are continuing to work with the private sector, but the public sector will have a role to play in this matter because it is very important to continue to offer a service to Canadians.

We can do that with this kind of model.

[English]

My deputy minister could offer further comments on that.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I only have two and a half minutes, and I'm at a minute and a half, so can you answer in five seconds? You can come back as well.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: I never get invited to anything.

As the minister said, the private-sector partner will be able to deliver the operations in the corridor. What that will allow Via Rail to do is focus attention on the other routes, like the Ocean, the Canadian and the one in northern Manitoba, and focus their operational energies there.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Yes, but the challenge is that, as you well know, right now the corridor provides 95% of Via Rail's passenger revenue, so it's going to be faced with trying to focus on the rest of Canada with mere crumbs from fare revenue, because it's serving long distances in sparsely populated areas.

This is my last point, Mr. Chair, as I see my time is nearly up.

Minister, your assertion that your government's plan for HFR is not privatization is tough to believe, because you're looking at a private-sector partner that's going to design, construct, finance, operate, set the schedules and fares for and profit from that corridor between Toronto and Quebec City. If that's not privatization, I don't know what is.

Sure, the corridor is going to continue to be owned nominally by the government, but this is a plan to privatize the most frequently used corridor in this nation, and I think it's a real shame. That's all.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Bachrach.

Next, we'll go to Mr. Vis.

Mr. Vis, the floor is yours. You have five minutes, sir.

Mr. Brad Vis (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, just to wrap up some of the things we've talked about, I learned today that the Government of Canada is the sole shareholder of Via Rail. I learned today that you've spoken to the CEO of Via Rail regarding the incident in August and the delay in service. Here at this committee, we've heard from passengers and people impacted that they have to plan for a six- to eight-hour window in order to plan accordingly to get from destination A to destination B with the services offered by Via Rail right now.

As the minister responsible and as the representative of the sole shareholder of Via Rail, can you guarantee to Canada today that as a result of this incident we will see measurable improvement in services offered to Canadian passenger rail users?

Hon. Anita Anand: I guarantee that I will exercise the oversight and authority vested in me as Minister of Transport to ensure that Via Rail does better for Canadian passengers, including in terms of

delay and in terms of service. Via Rail is operationally independent, and I will exercise my authority as far as I am able.

Thank you.

Mr. Brad Vis: It is operationally independent, yes, but as the shareholder, you can demand a time frame by which Via Rail must improve service delivery.

Are you willing to implement a time frame to ensure services improve in the very near future, and would you be able to provide that time frame to this committee?

Hon. Anita Anand: I will provide all correspondence to this committee, including the letter of expectations and the letter that my predecessor provided to demand better service from Via Rail. The updated action plan will be completed in the coming months, and I will table that action plan with this committee. Everything will be in place by Q1 of 2025.

Mr. Brad Vis: It will be in place by Q1 of 2025. Thank you, Minister.

I'm going to turn to some rail lines in another part of the country, the Wild West, or British Columbia.

My area of British Columbia has undergone more disasters and more expensive disasters than anywhere in the history of Canada. Since your appointment as minister, have you received any briefings on forecasting models for future environmental events impacting the CN, CP and Southern rail lines that operate in the Fraser Valley?

Hon. Anita Anand: I have engaged in discussions with my colleagues on this very issue, including CN and CP, and I am regularly updated on wildfires and natural disasters, given the situation in this country, including in western Canada.

Mr. Brad Vis: With respect to the floods that took place in 2021 that wiped out all three railways from operational service—

Mr. Vance Badawey (Niagara Centre, Lib.): On a point of order, what is the relevance?

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Vis. We're going to stop the clock at three minutes and two seconds.

Mr. Badawey.

Mr. Vance Badawey: What is the relevance to the issue with Via?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Badawey.

Mr. Brad Vis: Let me take a moment to explain the relevancy. Via Rail operates on those rail lines. Via Rail services in British Columbia and rural Canada cannot operate in those areas if the rail lines are washed out again.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. May I continue?

The Chair: I will ask, though, Mr. Vis, that you find a way to link it with the incident of August 31. That is why the minister is appearing here today. We have invited the minister to come back to discuss much broader issues.

Mr. Brad Vis: Via Rail services were disrupted because the rail lines that they use were not operational in a way to meet their expectations. In British Columbia, the rail lines were not operational either, the very same ones used by Via Rail in Quebec.

What steps is the minister willing to take to ensure that the rail lines in British Columbia are operational when the next natural disaster comes? I do believe, as your government has stated many times, that another natural disaster will come, which will wipe out all three of those railways simultaneously once again.

• (1630)

Hon. Anita Anand: Mr. Chair, I want to thank my honourable colleague for understanding the dangers and costs of climate change, which is something I know members of his own party do not acknowledge. I know that there are members in that party who deny the existence of climate change altogether.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you, Minister. I'm trying to ask a very serious question.

Hon. Anita Anand: I will say that the issues that my honourable colleague has raised relating to CN and CP will be taken under advisement. I am committed to working with CN and CP to ensure that the rail network is sound.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you.

Hon. Anita Anand: I will continue to say that we'll work with the railways to make sure that the infrastructure is resilient.

Mr. Brad Vis: I'm going to ask one more quick question.

The Nooksack and Sumas watershed transboundary flood initiative is an international collaborative framework to identify actions to reduce flood risk and restore habitats. Why is the Government of Canada not working with our counterparts in the United States to address this area of common concern? We have the province of British Columbia on the line. Why is the federal Department of Transport not participating in these critical international discussions?

The Chair: Mr. Vis, I am going to have to just cut you off there. That's not relevant to what we're discussing here today, sir.

Mr. Brad Vis: Mr. Chair, I will challenge you on that point. The border is within kilometres of the rail lines in discussion. The rail lines cannot operate unless we consider the impact of the Nooksack River just over the border in the United States. It is completely relevant to the reliability of rail passenger services in Canada. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I appreciate that, Mr. Vis. There are five seconds left in your time. If the minister wants to respond to that, there are five seconds left.

Hon. Anita Anand: I thank the member for the question.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now turn it over, finally, to Mr. Badawey. We don't have much time. I'll allow you to have one question, sir, and then I have to let the minister go.

Mr. Vance Badawey: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Actually, Mr. Vis's comments and questions are a perfect segue in terms of the question that I have.

We have heard from the minister that she is ensuring that we have a commitment to passenger safety. We have heard that she wants to have a commitment from Via Rail with respect to enhanced customer service, a focus on reliability, and, as we heard in previous meetings, the compensation that was afforded to the passengers.

What I want to do, and as a segue from Mr. Vis, is to speak about and ask about the infrastructure investments that have been made. As we all recognize, NTCF was a fund that was introduced by former ministers and of course that has allocated and appropriated many funds to ensure that the infrastructure in place was brought up to date, in particular as it relates to rail improvements. However, where I'm going with this is twofold.

Within a more integrated multimodal network, we recognize that, not only here in Canada but binationally, we are seeing some challenges with the integration of all methods of transportation. Do you feel comfortable that Via can handle future expectations on levels of service within a more robust integrated transportation network with respect to the investments that have been made and the investments that are expected to be made to ensure the movement of both trade and people, such as this corridor that Via is travelling on?

Hon. Anita Anand: First of all, I'd like to thank the honourable member for his service as parliamentary secretary in this role and the leadership that he provided, certainly, before I came into the role as minister.

I want to say a couple of things. First, at a high level, I want to contrast the investments that we have made as a government in Via Rail to replace its aging fleet—\$490 million in 2021, \$354 million in 2022, \$210 million in 2023, and in 2024, funding a new fleet—with the investments of the Conservative Party of Canada: 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013—zero dollars invested. Since taking office, our government has invested over \$797 million in replacing the corridor fleet, so I will say that we have evidenced a commitment to Via Rail as a whole.

I know that the honourable member is very concerned, and rightly so, with supply chain resiliency, and I appreciate his work on that matter. The national trade corridors fund is a trade-enabling infrastructure program. It helps infrastructure owners and users to invest in critical assets that support economic activity and the physical movement of goods and people, so to date our government has approved \$4.1 billion in federal funding for 213 projects across the country, leveraging a total investment of \$10.7 billion.

The answer to your question, then, is yes, it is important.

• (1635)

Mr. Vance Badawey: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Badawey, and thank you, Minister, on behalf of all members of the committee. We want to thank you for your time here today.

Colleagues, I'm going to suspend for two minutes so we can transfer over to the next round of witnesses. The meeting is now suspended.

• (1635) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1640)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order. I'd like to once again welcome our witnesses from the transport department. We'll begin our line of questioning right away, with Mr. Lawrence.

Mr. Lawrence, the floor is yours. You have six minutes, sir.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for appearing, or in some cases staying. We appreciate that. Thank you, in all seriousness, for being here in person. It makes the questioning much easier, so I do appreciate it when the officials are able to make it down with us. Thank you for that.

I just want to start by having you give us a bit of understanding. In the minister's testimony, I got a little inconsistency, if I'm honest, in the fact that she was both saying that we as a federal government are not responsible for Via, and at the same time saying that Via will do better.

Does the Minister of Transport, in accordance with the agreement or the association between the Government of Canada and Via, have the authority to improve the service of Via Rail, in your understanding of their agreement?

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: Via Rail, as a Crown corporation, like other Crowns, is responsible for its operations, so it is up to the management of Via Rail, when an incident like this happens or just in their regular operations, to ensure performance. It's the responsibility of the board of Via Rail to ensure that happens in their interaction, so the minister, as the portfolio minister responsible, will set expectations to the chair of the board.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Are those expectations public?

Mr. Craig Hutton (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Policy, Department of Transport): In terms of the expectations, those letters of expectation go directly from the minister to the board chair.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Could you provide us with those letters of expectation?

Mr. Craig Hutton: We'll go back and take a look at what we can provide to the committee in terms of letters of expectation.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Okay. I would just like unanimous consent to request that this official provide those documents to the committee.

The Chair: Yes, Ms. Koutrakis?

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: I just have a clarification. If I'm not mistaken, when the minister was here, in response to one of the questions she did commit to forwarding to us the letters—her letter to Via Rail, the expectations. If I'm not mistaken, she has already committed to doing that.

The Chair: I'm going to confer with the clerk to ensure that's indeed the case.

There isn't unanimity on whether or not those were the documents she committed to providing, Ms. Koutrakis. There is a motion before us for unanimous consent to request those.

Do we have any objections?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Mr. Lawrence, the floor is yours.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Thank you very much.

Could you also comment on the action plans and protocols that were changed at Via Rail, or the expectations following the Cobourg incident? The minister talked about those protocols not being followed. Could you specify what protocols from the department were not followed, following the Cobourg incident?

• (1645)

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: I'm going to turn to my colleague in one second.

Largely, these were with respect to communications with the department. They communicated our expectations for how they are to escalate this internally, within Via, when something like this happens.

Lisa.

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe (Assistant Deputy Minister, Safety and Security, Department of Transport): The protocol requires them to communicate with us when they become aware of a delay that's going to be, I think, three hours or more.

That's what they did not do.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Okay.

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: We have now strengthened that protocol requirement.

We think this was an isolated incident. There are delays that happen in other instances, and they have been very good at communicating with us.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: For delays of three hours or more, they are to contact Transport Canada.

Is that right?

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: Yes. As soon as they become aware there is going to be.... Sometimes they know ahead of time that there will be a delay of three hours. As soon as they become aware that it's going to be three hours or more, they are to communicate with us.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Thank you very much. That's very useful.

As I started to do this in my first round and agreed to move it to my second round, I would love to get UC, at this point, to have the former minister of transportation, Pablo Rodriguez—of course, he is still a member of Parliament now—to come for an hour or more, per the Via schedule, in order to outline some of the communication that happened between his office, Transport Canada and Via.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Lawrence.

We have a motion on the floor that was previously put forward by Mr. Lawrence. We'll be discussing it now.

Are there any questions, comments or thoughts on that?

Yes, Mr. Badawey.

Mr. Vance Badawey: To clarify, the motion is for you, as chair, to invite the former minister to the committee.

The Chair: Yes, that's it.

Mr. Vance Badawey: Okay.

The Chair: Are there any other questions or comments?

If not, I'll go to a vote.

(Motion agreed to)

Mr. Philip Lawrence: How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have two minutes.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Thank you.

There was a breach in the protocol that Via Rail is supposed to call you any time there's a three-hour delay or longer. They did not contact you.

When was the first time Transport Canada received notice of the delay in Quebec over Labour Day weekend?

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: I think it was around 6:30. The train had an initial mechanical issue—a broken air hose—at 11:20 on August 31. We received our first notification at 6:45 p.m.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: I'm sorry. What time was the initial...?

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: It was 11:20 a.m.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: It was seven hours or so—if I do my math correctly—until you received it. That's when you first became aware of it.

What was your response? They call in. "We have a delay." I'm more interested in a go-forward basis. How do you then work with Via Rail to sort out the issues? What happens?

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: The protocol requires them to update us on an hourly basis once they first notify us. I can tell you that there was regular communication with them throughout.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Do you have the ability to, for example, marshal resources? We heard one of the reasons they didn't disembark passengers was that they thought it was unsafe to do so. Obviously, the federal government has a lot of resources. Are you able to work with local police or others to get people off?

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: As I understand it, they were on a bridge, so it would not have been—

Mr. Philip Lawrence: I mean just in general. I'm more interested in a go-forward basis. They're stuck in the forest—

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: That's up to them to call upon the resources that are available to them. The minister made reference to the fact that they actually have to make arrangements with bus operators, etc.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next, we have Mr. Iacono.

[Translation]

The floor is yours for six minutes, Mr. Iacono.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks also to the witnesses for being here.

On September 19, 2024, in his testimony before the committee, Mr. Péroquin, the president and chief executive officer of Via Rail Canada, stated that the company was conducting a comprehensive assessment to determine the causes of the multiple mechanical failures on train 622.

Are you aware of those discussions between Via Rail and Siemens to determine the cause of the mechanical failures?

• (1650)

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: The investigation they are conducting is their project. They have agreed to make the reports that come out of that analysis available.

We are going to take their analysis into account, of course, but we are also doing our own analysis in order to properly understand the causes of the mechanical problems that led to the incident.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: So you know that there is an investigation, but you do not know when the findings of the investigation will be delivered to you.

Should that not have been established first, given the urgency of the situation, since there are other trains still operating? Would Transport Canada not have thought that useful?

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: We don't have a precise deadline. We only know that it will be in the next few months. It might be difficult to set a deadline given that they don't know where the investigation is going to take them.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: To your knowledge, have these new trains had other major mechanical problems?

[English]

Mr. Stephen Scott (Director General, Rail Safety and Security, Department of Transport): From a regulator's perspective, we're not aware of a systemic issue with the fleet at this time.

[Translation]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: How satisfied are you with the performance of the new Siemens Venture trains to date?

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: As my colleague said, there are no systemic problems. It is a new fleet, so it is understood that adjustments are going to be needed along the way. For now, however, there is no widespread problem with the new equipment.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: On September 4, 2024, the former minister of transport required that Via Rail update its emergency management action plan and review the communication protocol with Transport Canada within 30 days.

Have you received what was requested?

Mr. Stephen Scott: Thank you for the question.

As the minister said, we have received a letter from Via Rail management informing us of the key measures that will be implemented.

[English]

It's part of the independent investigations that will occur. We will be receiving those, but as the minister said, we haven't received all the complete action plans at this point in time.

[Translation]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: So to your knowledge, Via Rail has not yet responded to those requests, which were to have been met within 30 days.

[English]

Mr. Stephen Scott: I think some elements have come in, and we're waiting on others.

[Translation]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Could you describe Transport Canada's involvement in these efforts, if any?

Mr. Stephen Scott: Thank you for your question.

[English]

As the regulator, we will review the reports and findings that Via Rail commissions and provides to us. We will do our own due diligence review to ensure that we're satisfied with any issues around the fleet, and I'm referring specifically to the fleet. If we're not satisfied in any way or if we believe extra action should be taken from a safety perspective, we, as a regulator, have the tools and measures to impose those. That's on the safety side, specifically.

• (1655)

[Translation]

Mr. Angelo Iacono: I am pleased to hear it. I was concerned specifically about the safety of train users. I am actually one.

When do you think we can expect to receive some answers, some conclusions and details, so we can reassure Canadians and let them know they can continue taking the train with complete safety?

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: First, given that this is a safety issue, I want to say that following the incident we did an inspection and we did not find any instances of non-compliance. I want to reassure Canadians on that point.

Regarding the report, as the minister said, we expect to receive the report and recommendations in the early part of 2025.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Setlakwe and Mr. Iacono.

The floor is yours for six minutes, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Regarding the incident that occurred on Labour Day, we learned from the media that the train in question was being run in at the time the incident and the technical problem occurred, but nonetheless the train was carrying passengers on a regular schedule during the running-in period.

Do you have more information about the procedure for putting a new train into circulation during the running-in period? Is it used to carry passengers as soon as it is received?

Is there checking to be done or protocols to follow to make sure the trains are working properly before passengers are boarded?

Mr. Stephen Scott: Thank you for your question.

All railway companies must follow the same procedure when they put new trains into circulation.

[English]

There are several steps that the railways need to take to fulfill their obligations as regulated entities to provide assurances to us as the regulator that the new fleet meets the new safety standards. It's a lot of engineering paperwork and documentation. It's their obligation to demonstrate to us that the new fleet meets the safety standards.

We do a due diligence review on that, and that includes dry-run inspections before the fleet is introduced to satisfy ourselves that it meets those standards. In addition to that, the company itself has a series of pre-commissioning milestones and procedures that it does. That's the Transport Canada role; we don't have an official certification role. We're not a certification body. However, we do that due diligence review to ensure that the engineering standards and guidelines are being met with any new fleet from any railway company.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: As I understand it, the trains are not tested empty. You are saying that checking is done to see whether they meet engineering standards and people are asked to complete the paperwork, but are the trains run empty, with a driver, to see whether they are working before they are put into circulation?

Mr. Stephen Scott: I don't have all the details, but I imagine that much of the process for the railway companies consists of doing empty testing to make sure everything is working.

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: Tests were done.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Right.

Mr. Thangaraj, you started to answer one of my questions earlier, about the new long-haul fleet. I don't know whether you remember what you wanted to say then.

[English]

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: The government announced an investment in the new fleet outside of the corridor. These are for the long-haul fleet, typically the Canadian or the Ocean, which will consist of locomotives as well as specialty cars. We wanted to give an update on where that is in process. Via has launched some of the pre-procurement activities. For example, they have a request for information just to do a market sounding of what is available. Then, based on the information that is currently being reviewed, that will allow them to look at how they would structure a request for qualification and eventually a request for proposals for the procurement of that fleet.

• (1700)

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Is there a target for the new Via Rail fleet entering into service? Is there a timetable?

[English]

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: I don't have a date for that.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Right.

Is that because it doesn't exist or is it because you don't know?

[English]

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: I don't have information on the date, the potential in-service date. They're going through the procurement process, which will inform when they will be able to pick a partner to be the preferred vendor for those things. That will inform the in-service date.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: I am asking you this question because last year, Via Rail publicly admitted that in ten years, its existing fleet would probably not be operational. I wondered whether there was going to be a new operational fleet before ten years from now, because otherwise, there will be no long-haul trains left, if I understand correctly.

[English]

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: I don't have that information now, but if the committee asks, I can see if I can find out.

[Translation]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: My first question is for you or one of your colleagues. Has the technical problem experienced on Labour Day with one of the trains, and I unfortunately no longer have the number in my head, been resolved? Could this problem arise in other trains of the same model?

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: Both problems have been resolved. The train had a mechanical breakdown and Via Rail was not equipped to repair it on site. We wondered whether that problem might recur elsewhere. The studies will tell us more, but from what we see at the moment, it is not a systemic problem.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[English]

Next we have Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours. You have six minutes, sir.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Given the on-time performance challenges that Via Rail faces, many of them related to the fact that they're sharing tracks with other carriers, the three-hour notification requirement or protocol seems quite short. How often does Transport Canada get notified by Via Rail about delays of three hours or greater?

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: I don't have the exact frequency. We have the data. I just don't have it on me. It's something we could get back to you on.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I was thinking about how, during the pandemic, we saw airline passengers stranded on the tarmac on board airplanes for well over three hours. Does Transport Canada have a similar protocol with the airlines to notify the agency when there are delays of greater than three hours?

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: Operationally, in a situation, for example, when there is a tarmac delay or a weather delay, airlines, let's say with our Transport Canada situation centre as well as with officials in the department, will notify us of what is going on and the anticipated time to resolve it. It's an operating protocol they have that we established, probably during the pandemic, but that continues to this day.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Is it a similar threshold in terms of the notification period?

Mr. Craig Hutton: The notification period with respect to—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Excuse me, Mr. Chair.

I'm having a little trouble focusing on the witness testimony. I wonder if...

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

I'm just going to ask all members to please keep their speaking on the sidelines to a minimum while the line of questioning is taking place.

• (1705)

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I was trying to send you a signal. It's all good.

Mr. Craig Hutton: The notification period with respect to airlines is usually for delays or cancellations that are beyond the window of an hour, because that's sort of the threshold at which it's difficult for an airline to make up the time in the air. That's on departure.

If there's something unusual about it, in terms of a situation that will have significant knock-on effects with, say, 10% of air passengers, that's when we get notified by a particular carrier of—

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Wow. That's a lot of notifications. As someone who flies a lot, I can tell you that there are a lot of delays.

What would Transport Canada have done if Via Rail had notified the agency at the three-hour mark in the case of the Via Rail incident between Montreal and Quebec?

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: I can start.

Our regulatory framework is about making sure that there are no fatalities—no lives lost. It's all about the safety of passengers.

Normally, when they inform us that there's a situation happening, we will reassure ourselves that they are taking the steps necessary. Do we need to start making accommodation for transferring passengers? Do passengers have access to bathrooms, water, food and those sorts of things?

We will be asking those questions, but Via Rail and all of the operators have an obligation to have those plans in place. As part of this, these are the things we are reviewing with them to make sure that their plans are.... We're not prescriptive, but they basically have to make sure that passengers are safe.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I guess what I'm trying to understand is.... They're an arm's-length Crown corporation and, as the minister said, it's up to them to keep passengers safe and to deal with issues when they crop up. I'm just curious where that line exists between expecting them to meet their mandate and get passengers where they need to go and Transport Canada flying in on a helicopter and starting to tell them which bathrooms should be used when and that kind of thing.

What kind of hands-on approach would Transport Canada be equipped to provide? Are you going to direct Via Rail and tell them they need to do another water service and hand out more granola bars? It seems to me like they were doing everything they could, given the resources they had.

In an emergency situation, do you go in and direct their staff to do things differently?

The minister at the time seemed very upset that they didn't notify Transport Canada, but I'm unclear as to what Transport Canada would do with that information.

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: In a situation such as that, the operational response is solely the responsibility of Via Rail. We get informed to make sure that the safety elements are covered off. For example, if it was due to a trespass or a derailment, that is where our role would kick in on the operational aspects of this, but they have to communicate with us in order for that to happen. They have to communicate those things to us within a prescribed amount of time, so that we can provide assurances around safety.

On the in-passenger, do we care about the passenger experience? Of course we do, but we will not operationally direct Via on the response on something like that.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Okay. You might confirm that other operators aren't going to pose a risk to the train that is broken down, etc. That's clear to me.

If I could, Mr. Chair, I'll just ask one more question.

In the airline sector, we now have passenger protection regulations, as flawed as they may be. There has certainly been a discussion about similar regulations in the passenger rail sector.

Where are discussions at within Transport Canada on rail passenger protection regulations, so that passengers would get the compensation they deserve in situations like this?

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: As part of this incident, we have looked at the issue of passenger rights. One of the outcomes of this is that Via Rail has very clearly put out expectations on its website in

terms of what passengers should expect as regards refunds or credits, etc., in the event of delays like this.

As an operator, I think they're in the best position to determine and work with their customers and be responsive to their customers in terms of how they address these types of situations.

● (1710)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we'll go to Mr. Vis.

Mr. Vis, the floor is yours. You have five minutes, please.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Would the Department of Transport agree that the ports in Surrey and Vancouver are of vital national interest, yes or no?

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: In the Canada Marine Act, those ports—

Mr. Brad Vis: Yes or no?

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: Yes.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you.

I'm in the position, as the MP for Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, where all of the rail lines intersect in Canada.... We had a big disaster in 2021. The Fraser Valley was flooded out. All of the rail lines were washed out. We did get some DMAF funding, but it's not nearly enough even to bring us back to where we were with respect to the critical infrastructure that protects our rail lines and the Trans-Canada Highway from future disasters. The DMAF doesn't actually allow for infrastructure upgrades.

The City of Abbotsford asked me specifically today—and I guess I'll direct this question to Mr. Hutton—what funding programs will be put forward to invest in supply chain resiliency for a city like Abbotsford, which has all of the major rail lines and, basically, all of the major goods that Canada exports running through it. Where should Abbotsford go?

Mr. Craig Hutton: Thanks.

The resiliency of supply chains and the communities through which there are major transportation activities and export opportunities is extremely important to us. That's why we have the national trade corridors fund. One of the objectives of that fund is to support the resiliency of supply chain activities.

Mr. Brad Vis: That's right.

I did actually look, after Mr. Badawey brought up the \$4.1 billion invested in the national trade corridors fund. There were multiple funding allotments to the Vancouver Fraser Port Authority and some private sector companies that did benefit my region, absolutely, the Ashcroft Terminal being a big one in my riding as well. However, there was no municipality in the country that received funding under the NTCF, as reported on online today.

Can you clarify? Can the City of Abbotsford apply, under the national trade corridors fund, to, for example, improve our pump stations, which are critical to ensuring that the rail lines and the highway don't flood again? Can you answer that for me?

Mr. Craig Hutton: I would also say that there is other funding available to municipalities for things like you mentioned around sewer, waste water and water management. That's included as part of the suite of programs at Infrastructure Canada.

Mr. Brad Vis: If you can't answer that because you're not Infrastructure Canada—

The Chair: Mr. Vis, I'm going to cut you off there for a point of order. You're at two minutes and 45 seconds.

Mr. Vance Badawey: Mr. Chair, I've let it go, but it's getting worse. We're getting way off the topic here.

Mr. Brad Vis: No.

Mr. Vance Badawey: Mr. Chair, we're talking about the incident with Via Rail. That's what we're talking about. I just want to—

Mr. Brad Vis: Mr. Badawey, if you'd like, I could go over your previous testimony.

Mr. Vance Badawey: I have the floor right now. You can respond to it when the chair asks you to respond to it. However, right now I have the floor under a point of order.

Mr. Brad Vis: I'm ready to play politics when you are.

Mr. Vance Badawey: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order with regard to relevance.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Badawey.

We've given some leeway in the second round, but I will ask everybody to try to bring it back to the subject matter at hand. If you could, it would be greatly appreciated.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: On that point of order, Mr. Chair, it is the usual practice of committees.... I've had the fortune of sitting on many committees, and I'm sure Mr. Badawey has. With the minister, I can understand a little more strictness, but generally, with officials, there is a great deal of leniency. We would appreciate it if that courtesy would.... We'd be, I'm quite confident, agreeable to returning that courtesy.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lawrence.

Mr. Vance Badawey: Perhaps I could respond to that.

The Chair: Be very brief, Mr. Badawey.

Mr. Vance Badawey: That's why I waited so long to call a point of order; it was to give that leeway. However, now it's going way over.

Mr. Lawrence and Mr. Vis, let's be clear. This is a study that we're embarking on, and I'm valuing the time that we have with both the minister and the department. I really want to talk about the issues and ask questions to get answers on the incident. That way, we can get that quality information from the department with respect to the incident. That's what I'm looking forward to. I'm sure we can come up with some very productive dialogue with the department.

We have the department here with us today to try to discuss and deal with the situation with respect to the Via Rail incident that happened this past September.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

• (1715)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Badawey.

Once again, I'm going to ask everybody to try to bring it back as much as possible. There is a lot of leeway that's already been given. You've actually done a very good job of, perhaps, giving a preamble that brings you to that point.

Mr. Brad Vis: I'm ready to do that again.

The Chair: Mr. Muys did a very good job. You did as well, Mr. Vis, and I ask you, once again, to try to do that with this particular line of questioning. It will be beneficial to the chair.

Mr. Brad Vis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just note that it was Mr. Badawey who raised the national trade corridors fund. I reviewed the 130 programs that the Government of Canada funded. None of them related to Via Rail or to passenger rail service. It was Mr. Badawey who informed me of the \$4.1 billion. As you will note, Mr. Chair, all of my questions were related to the very fund that Mr. Badawey raised in committee first. If that was not out of order, how could my questions be out of order?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vis.

I ask that, if there are any feelings that, perhaps, another member is not sticking to what the purpose of the meeting is, they bring that to the attention of the chair.

Mr. Brad Vis: I appreciate you, Mr. Chair.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Brad Vis: Mr. Hutton, in the case that Abbotsford actually receives reliable and rural Via Rail services one day—if and when we ever get that service—we will have to consider the impact of pump stations and of our existing rail lines to serve passengers, and of reliable infrastructure for the people of British Columbia. If the City of Abbotsford wants to prepare for that eventuality one day, what fund should they be looking at to ensure that they have the requisite infrastructure in place that is not only climate-resilient but able to serve the future passengers of Via Rail in the Fraser Valley, which also serves as one of the most critical trade corridors of the entire country?

The Chair: Is that to one person in particular, Mr. Vis? It is a very good question, and I want to make—

Mr. Brad Vis: It is for Mr. Hutton.

The Chair: Mr. Hutton, the floor is yours, please.

Mr. Craig Hutton: The Canada community-building fund, which is administered by Infrastructure Canada, is an appropriate fund for PTs to apply to. That said, PTs are also able to apply as eligible proponents for the NTCF.

Mr. Brad Vis: Are those funds currently open?

Mr. Vance Badawey: They're annual.

The Chair: I'm sorry, but can I get that response from Mr. Hutton?

Mr. Craig Hutton: There are no open calls at the moment for the NTCF.

Mr. Brad Vis: When will the calls for proposals be open again?

Mr. Craig Hutton: I think, Mr. Chair, that's something that will be considered by the government in the future, based on demand.

Mr. Brad Vis: In the eventuality that Via Rail decides to operate in the Fraser Valley once again, has Transport Canada done any studies on the impact of our border crossing flooding and what impact that would have on future passengers of Via Rail?

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: On a point of order, Chair, this is not relevant.

The Chair: There are 20 seconds left. I'm just going to allow a quick response to this, please.

Mr. Craig Hutton: I'm not aware of that, Mr. Chair, but I'm not speaking, either, for other departments that may have undertaken some work in this area.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I thank Mr. Vis for attempting to make that link. I appreciate it very much, sir. I think you actually did a good job.

Next we go to Mr. Rogers. Mr. Rogers, the floor is yours. You have five minutes, sir.

Mr. Churence Rogers (Bonavista—Burin—Trinity, Lib.): Welcome to our witnesses today.

The passenger we had as a witness during one of our previous meetings.... I want to focus on the things he talked about—some of the frustrations, of course, and the things he endured through that 10-hour period. One question I asked him was in terms of the complaint process. Via Rail talked about how they received multiple complaints through a variety of means and so on, and that they respond to all valid complaints. I want to ask you, as officials, are you aware of Via Rail's complaint mechanisms and responses, and how they actually responded to the complaints of the passengers who were on that particular train, train 622?

• (1720)

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: Part of the minister's request to Via Rail is for them to provide details on how Via Rail communicates with passengers and resolves complaints. What Via has noted is that they will ensure that there is 24-7 support to communicate information to passengers and to the public. Again, I think there is more that they will provide to us in terms of their response on customer service, but they made that initial commitment.

Mr. Churence Rogers: Okay.

I'll ask this question: In your opinion, was the appropriate compensation for this delay provided to these passengers? This gentleman testified about having a free trip somewhere on Via Rail and some other compensation, but it seemed to be pretty meagre. Do you think that was adequate compensation, or should there be a major improvement in that?

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: I'm not aware of what Via did provide in terms of compensation, but as I said earlier, they are providing passengers with clarity about what they should expect in terms of refunds and other compensation, such as credits, for events like this, but that determination is the responsibility of Via Rail.

Mr. Churence Rogers: Actually, they did provide a travel credit that would expire within one year, and a couple of other things.

Train 622 was part of a new fleet of Siemens Venture trainsets, which are currently being phased in throughout the Windsor-Quebec corridor. Are you aware of the ongoing discussion between Via Rail and Siemens to determine the cause of the mechanical breakdowns? How are satisfied are you with the Siemens response to these mechanical issues?

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: This is part of the investigation that is ongoing. Actually, since the original question was asked, we have found out that the report on that is due to us sometime in the first half of November, which is sooner than I had said earlier. Those discussions are ongoing, and we expect the report in the coming weeks.

As I said previously, we will take that report, and it will be useful to us, but we'll also be doing our own assessment of that report and what transpired.

Mr. Churence Rogers: Are you aware of any other significant mechanical breakdowns with these new trains?

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: No.

Mr. Churence Rogers: Okay.

When I think about train 622 and the 10-hour delay that was experienced by the passengers on that train, was it due to a lack of protocol that was in place at the time, or was it due to a failure in following existing procedures or protocol?

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: Stephen may help me on this, but there was a confluence of events. Part of it was mechanical in the sense that there was a hose that got worn. They couldn't repair it on site, which causes.... You have to get somebody to come in and fix it, and then I believe there happened to be an issue with the train that came to the rescue as well.

I mentioned that they didn't have the proper equipment to do the repairs—they fixed that—and then there was some lack of training of personnel—

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: —on the train as well. So far, that's what has been identified.

Mr. Churence Rogers: Can I ask a quick question?

The Chair: Sir, you are 30 seconds over. You are asking this committee for a great deal, sir.

Mr. Churence Rogers: I want to ask a question about people with disabilities on the train.

The Chair: If that's the question, I think we should give you the time, sir.

• (1725)

Mr. Philip Lawrence: I'll give UC for that.

The Chair: By all means, Mr. Rogers, go ahead.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: I wouldn't do it for Vance.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Mr. Rogers, I don't see any objection. Please go ahead.

Mr. Churence Rogers: I'm wondering what the experience was for people on that train who might have been in wheelchairs or for people with disabilities. Was there any report on that in particular?

Mr. Stephen Scott: I don't have details specifically on how persons with disabilities may have been handled or treated on this train.

Generally speaking, passenger railways, as part of their passenger handling safety plans, need to have procedures and training in place to assist persons with disabilities, including during emergency and crisis situations where they may need assistance to evacuate or move to another location. Those procedures are a requirement the railways must have.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Scott.

Thank you, Mr. Rogers. That was a great question.

[*Translation*]

The next speaker is Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

You have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The accounts given by passengers who testified before the committee and in articles in the media talked about there not being enough food on board. The passengers were essentially served pretzels and mini chocolate bars.

Having travelled on a Via Rail train in the past, I can tell you these are not big bags of pretzels. There are not a tonne of pretzels in them. There may be one pretzel, or two or three. I don't know.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Sometimes there are four.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: In any event, there is not much to satisfy a big appetite.

In the letter sent to Via Rail by the former minister of transport, Mr. Rodriguez, to ask for changes to be made, I didn't see anything relating to the treatment of passengers or the supply of food.

At your end, at Transport Canada, do you look into things like that? Are you going to make sure there are sufficient provisions for passengers in the event of a mechanical failure or major delay?

[*English*]

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: I think the provision, as colleagues have mentioned, of water, food and working lavatories is essential.

Therefore, as part of that escalation process, Via officials will decide at what point alternate transportation should...and when it can be fixed, and that assessment. They will do that in the second hour of the delay. They will take into consideration all of those things while making that decision.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: If I understand correctly, you are leaving it to Via Rail to handle this situation. You do not intend to intervene, even though it seems fairly obvious to me that there are major problems there.

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: Personnel did order food for the passengers during the waiting period when they were on board the train. In case you would like to know, they ordered pizza.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: It was four pieces.

Ms. Lisa Setlakwe: It is up to Via Rail to handle this situation. We expect the company to organize things accordingly. However, I think this would be a good question to ask Via Rail representatives: What plans they have put in place to deal with this situation.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: I understand that Via Rail manages its operations, but at some point it also falls within the portfolio of the Minister of Transport. Ultimately, Transport Canada regulates Via Rail. It seems to me that it might be worth getting that idea across to it. I think the minister would be in a position to do that. It seems to me that a word from the minister would certainly get Via Rail to listen.

I see my time is up.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[*English*]

Finally, today, we have Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours. You have two and a half minutes, sir.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Transport Action Canada, in the wake of this incident, recommended that Transport Canada treat trains that are broken down—like the one in this circumstance—in a way similar to trains in a station. I believe there's a rule for trains in a station that protects them from other trains that might be on the corridor. It controls speed and that sort of thing. It protects passengers.

Is this something you're familiar with, and is it something Transport Canada is considering?

Mr. Stephen Scott: I'm not familiar with that specific recommendation.

Generally speaking, there are procedures in place when a train comes to an unexpected stop or breaks down somewhere. There are emergency broadcast requirements through the operations networks and communications with rail traffic control centres to alert nearby trains. From a pure safety and security perspective, there are well-established procedures in place to ensure that a particular disruption doesn't cause a bigger safety issue or accident.

• (1730)

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Do those include speed limits on other trains that might be passing on adjacent tracks?

Mr. Stephen Scott: They very likely do, but I can't say for sure.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I'll follow up on a question Mr. Barsalou-Duval asked a little while ago.

I'm wondering whether Transport Canada has analyzed the risk of fleet loss for the long-distance fleets, understanding that Via Rail is struggling to keep the old trains operational. There's a huge risk to service on those routes, and we don't have a timeline for the replacement of the fleet with new trains.

Has this been analyzed by Transport Canada?

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: We have a date of 2034.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Oh, you have a date. That just came in. There we go. Thank you.

That's a long time from now. These trains are breaking down all the time, it seems. The CEO of Via Rail said their mechanics are performing miracles just to keep those old 1950s cars on the rails. Has there been a formal analysis by Transport Canada of the risk of service lost due to equipment breakdown on the long-distance routes? You can say if you're not familiar or if there maybe hasn't been.

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: I don't have that. I'd have to verify it.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Okay.

The last question I'll ask will be on behalf of our chair, because he's preoccupied with this question of army rations.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: This is your question.

Do you see how that works, when you pander to the chair?

The chair was asking whether some sort of durable ration could be stored on board trains as a way of ensuring that people have enough calories in situations in which they unfortunately are stranded for more hours than there are regular rations for. Is that something that could be regulated through Transport Canada, or is that not something that's been discussed?

This is Peter's idea.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: I think we'd have to look at our legal authorities and where we can regulate. Again, I would suggest that this would fall under the operational remit of Via Rail. That is something I will raise with the CEO.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Things like the amount of food could be regulated.

Mr. Arun Thangaraj: About that I'm not sure.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Bachrach. You have one additional minute added to your time at the next meeting.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: I appreciate that very much, sir.

On behalf of all committee members, I want to thank our witnesses for appearing today and for providing testimony at this very important study.

Colleagues, before I adjourn, I want to remind everyone that the clerk will be waiting for witnesses for the study that was put forward by Monsieur Barsalou-Duval, which is the regulation of recreational boating on Canada's waterways. She's expecting those no later than Tuesday. If you could provide at least a preliminary list, she could get started.

When we resume after the break, we will be embarking on the clause-by-clause of the McKinsey study. Following that, we will be embarking on the four meetings for Mr. Barsalou-Duval's study and then the clause-by-clause on the accessibility study.

This meeting is now adjourned.

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