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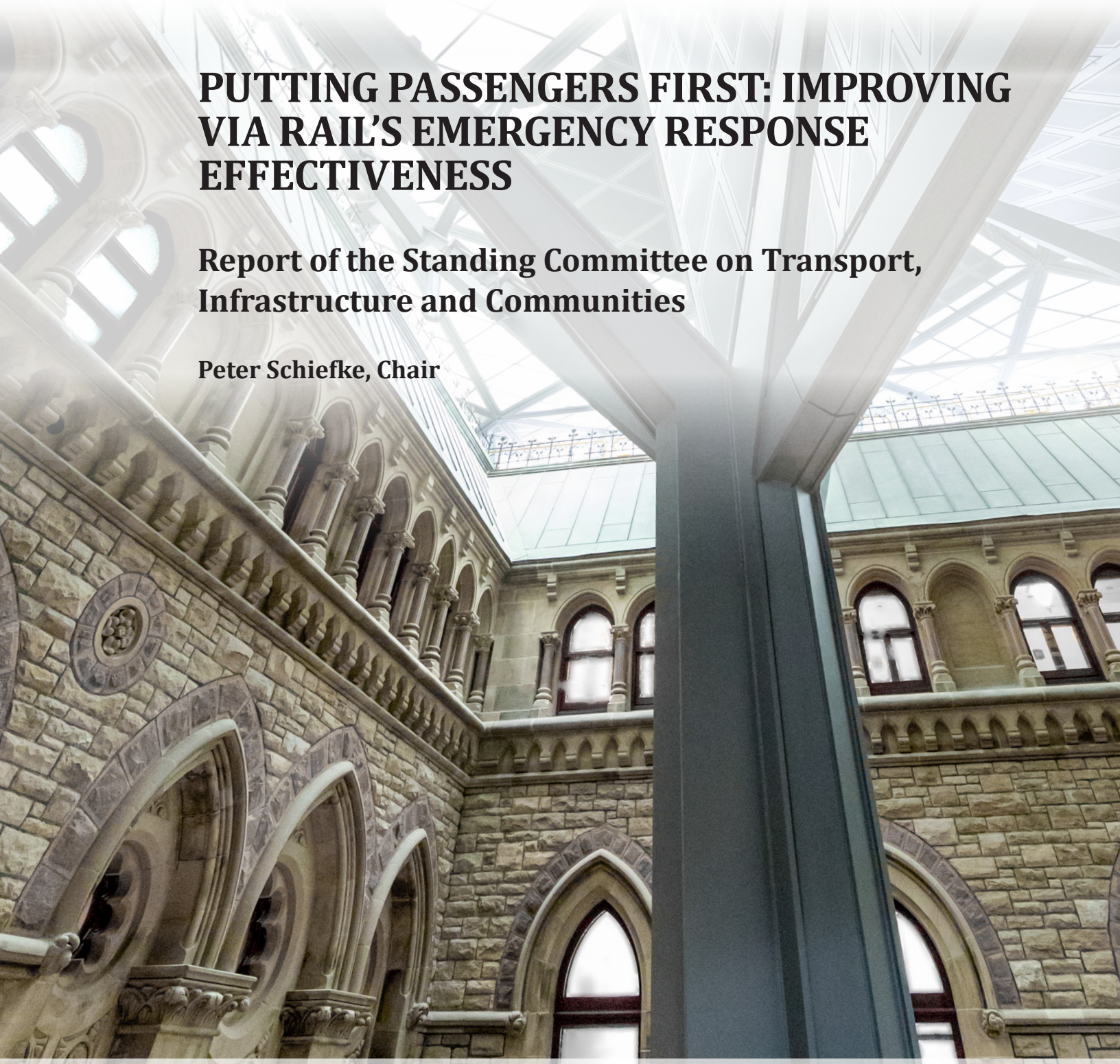

PUTTING PASSENGERS FIRST: IMPROVING VIA RAIL'S EMERGENCY RESPONSE EFFECTIVENESS

Report of the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities

Peter Schiefke, Chair

NOVEMBER 2025
45th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

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NOTICE TO READER

Reports from committees presented to the House of Commons

Presenting a report to the House is the way a committee makes public its findings and recommendations on a particular topic. Substantive reports on a subject-matter study usually contain a synopsis of the testimony heard, the recommendations made by the committee, as well as the reasons for those recommendations.

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THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND COMMUNITIES

has the honour to present its

SEVENTH REPORT

Pursuant to its mandate under Standing Order 108(2), the committee has studied passenger rail service - VIA Rail Canada Inc. incident on August 31, 2024, and has agreed to report the following:

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY

On 31 August 2024, VIA Rail train 622 experienced mechanical difficulties while travelling from Montréal to the city of Québec. Passengers on board arrived at their destination more than ten hours behind schedule, reporting insufficient supplies of food and water as well as non-functional toilets for a certain stretch of time. In response, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities (the committee) held three meetings to determine what went wrong and what is being done to ensure a similar situation is not repeated. The committee heard from representatives of VIA Rail Canada and Unifor, a passenger who was on board train 622, as well as the Minister of Transport and departmental officials.

Witnesses helped provide the committee with a timeline of what happened on board train 622 on 31 August 2024 and discussed potential points of failure from this incident. These include the mechanical issues experienced by the newly delivered train, VIA Rail's communications and escalation procedures, as well as training requirements for VIA Rail employees and management.

The committee also heard about steps being taken at the time, particularly in response to a letter from the then Minister of Transport, to address these points of failure. These include procedural reviews, investigations into the mechanical issues experienced by the train, and compensation to passengers. Witnesses provided their views on these potential solutions and their expected effectiveness in ensuring adequate passenger rail service in Canada.

LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of their deliberations committees may make recommendations which they include in their reports for the consideration of the House of Commons or the Government. Recommendations related to this study are listed below.

Recommendation 1

The committee condemns VIA Rail's failure to take care of its passengers once again after numerous incidents, including in December 2022 when VIA Rail passengers were stranded on trains 55 and 69 near Cobourg for over 12 hours with limited communication, food, and water. The committee recommends:

That VIA Rail present a formal plan to address its failures that led to these incidents within 60 days of this report being tabled.

Recommendation 2

That the Government of Canada continue to monitor VIA Rail's response to the incident aboard train 622 on 31 August 2024, in accordance with any recommendations made in either the independent reports commissioned by the Crown corporation or through Transport Canada's own analysis.

Recommendation 3

That the Government of Canada work with VIA Rail to evaluate whether its maintenance program and procedures must be updated and improved.

Recommendation 4

That VIA Rail front-line employees be given the necessary latitude to take unilateral and rapid action in crisis to better manage emergencies and ensure the safety and well-being of passengers and staff without requiring the approval of the infrastructure owner.

Recommendation 5

That the Government of Canada request that VIA Rail review and update its emergency management plans and procedures. This process should be undertaken in close collaboration with representatives of the workers

concerned and aim to optimize practices during major incidents, as well as to develop and regularly update its emergency plans and incident management procedures.

Recommendation 6

That the Government of Canada request that VIA Rail implement new or updated procedures and training for staff to better equip and support them in case of emergencies, including by strengthening training in managing difficult behaviour by taking into account the real-life experiences of front-line employees, while providing appropriate access to mental health support resources, and all other relevant support to employees.

Recommendation 7

That the Government of Canada work with VIA Rail to ensure more timely and accurate communications with Transport Canada officials when incidents occur.

Recommendation 8

That VIA Rail strengthen communication between management, front-line staff, and passengers by establishing clear and secure channels that facilitate the exchange of information in real time. This will ensure better coordination and proactive management of critical situations, while guaranteeing the safety of all passengers on board.

Recommendation 9

That the Government of Canada request VIA Rail provide a robust plan to ensure passengers will be provided basic care, such as food and water, access to toilets, and other services in similar emergency situations; and that VIA Rail establish and maintain minimum food and water reserves for at least 12 hours.

PUTTING PASSENGERS FIRST: IMPROVING VIA RAIL'S EMERGENCY RESPONSE EFFECTIVENESS

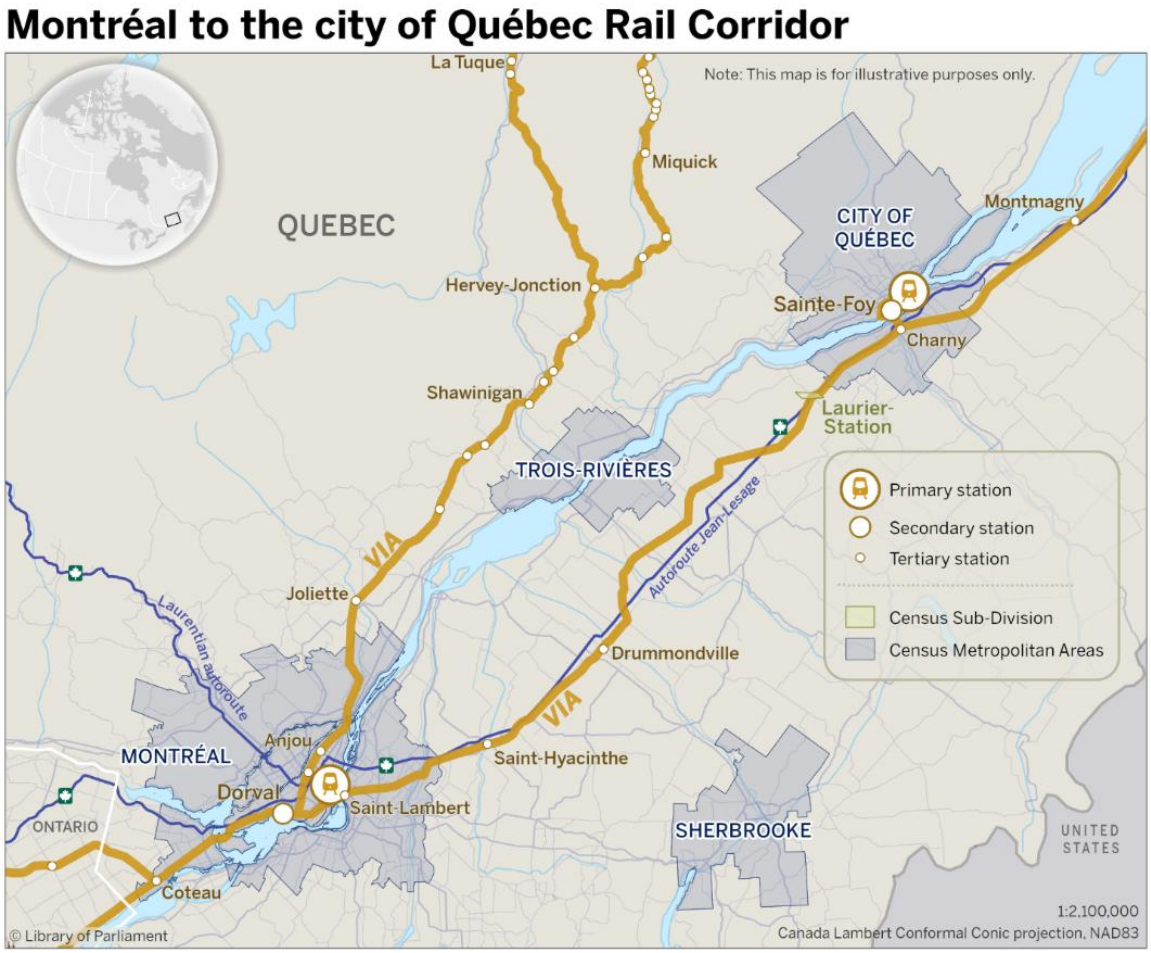
BACKGROUND

On 31 August 2024, VIA Rail train 622 experienced mechanical difficulties while travelling from Montréal to the city of Québec. Shortly before noon, the train was immobilized near the municipality of Laurier-Station, approximately 60 km southwest of its destination. Passengers finally arrived at the Québec station 10 hours behind schedule, around 10:00 p.m.[1]

Figure 1 illustrates VIA Rail routes and stations between Montréal and the city of Québec.

1 Chloé Bourquin, "Des passagers sont restés bloqués 10 heures dans un train," *La Presse*, 1 September 2024 [AVAILABLE IN FRENCH ONLY].

Figure 1—VIA Rail Service Between Montréal and the city of Québec



Sources: Map prepared by the Library of Parliament, 2024, using data obtained from Via Rail Canada Inc., *Stations & Real Estate*; Natural Resources Canada (NRCan), *Administrative Boundaries in Canada—CanVec Series—Administrative Features*, 1:5M, 1 March 2019; NRCan, *Transport Networks in Canada—CanVec Series—Transport Features*, 1:1M, 1 March 2019; NRCan, *Lakes, Rivers and Glaciers in Canada—CanVec Series—Hydrographic Features*, 1:5M, 1 March 2019; and Statistics Canada, *2021 Census—Boundary files*. The following software was used: Esri, ArcGIS Pro, version 3.3.1. Contains information licensed under *Open Government Licence—Canada* and *Statistics Canada Open Licence*.

According to VIA Rail's website, train 622 is part of the new fleet of Siemens Venture trainsets. Introduction of these new trains in the Windsor to Québec corridor began in 2023 and is ongoing.[2]

2 VIA Rail Canada Inc., "The Year at a Glance," *2023 Annual Report*.

On 6 September 2024, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities (the committee) adopted the following motion:

> That, given that,
>
> Over Labour Day weekend, passengers on VIA Rail Canada Inc. train 622 from Montreal to Quebec City were stuck for 10 hours with little communication from VIA Rail Canada Inc., limited food and water, and even a period of no electricity, washrooms or air conditioning, this committee dedicate three meetings to investigate this incident starting the week of Monday, September 16, 2024, and hear from:
>
> - Department of Transport officials for no less than two hours;
> - VIA Rail Canada Inc. leadership, including the Chief Executive Officer of VIA Rail Canada Inc., for no less than two hours;
> - Passengers that were on that train;
> - The Minister of Transport and Québec Lieutenant Pablo Rodriguez for no less than two hours by himself, and
>
> That this committee request the letter the minister sent to VIA Rail Canada Inc. as reported in the media.

Between 19 September 2024 and 10 October 2024, the committee held three meetings on this topic. It heard from 11 witnesses.

TIMELINE—VIA RAIL TRAIN 622 ON 31 AUGUST 2024

VIA Rail's train 622 operates daily, departing from Montréal Central Station at 8:20 am with a scheduled arrival time in Québec at 11:39 am, with several stops along the way.[3]

On Saturday, 31 August 2024, train 622 was stopped along its route due to a broken air hose. A written response provided to the committee by VIA Rail shows that an internal email notification was sent at 11:20 am to advise of this situation, indicating that the train was running 25 minutes late with 214 passengers on board.[4] Mr. Cédryk Coderre, a

3 Schedule according to VIA Rail Canada Inc.'s *Arrivals and Departure Schedule* (as of 3 December 2024).

4 Written response provided to the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities (TRAN) by VIA Rail Canada Inc.

passenger, appearing as an individual, was on board car number 2. He recalled that passengers were informed that there was a mechanical issue and that staff provided them with drinks and pretzels.

Mario Péloquin, President and Chief Executive Officer of VIA Rail Canada Inc., explained to the committee that VIA Rail's Operations Control Centre "takes care of all communications in all of the events that happen on VIA Rail." This control centre initiated an internal conference call, in accordance with VIA Rail's escalation procedures, at 12:20 pm to discuss the ongoing incident.[5]

While the crew were unable to fix the issue, the train was permitted to proceed shortly after 1:00 pm. According to Mr. Coderre, passengers were told that the issue had been fixed, but that the train would be moving at a slower pace than normal. An internal email was sent at 1:47 pm to advise that the train was moving, with a total delay of two hours and 52 minutes.[6] At this point, according to Mr. Péloquin, there was "no reason to believe that there would be another mechanical failure shortly after."

At 2:09 pm, another internal email was sent indicating that the train had stopped again due to a second engine shutdown. This email indicated that the train was immobilised in an "inaccessible location" near Laurier-Station. An on board announcement informed passengers that there was another mechanical issue.[7] Throughout the process, VIA Rail representatives were in contact with the Canadian National Railway (CN), which Rita Toporowski, VIA Rail's Chief Service Delivery Officer, indicated is typical in this type of situation. The possibility of a CN freight train providing assistance was discussed but it was determined that VIA train 24 (running from Ottawa to Québec) would be in a better position to help by connecting its own power supply to train 622.[8]

Ms. Toporowski told the committee that, at this point, the "problem-solving was around what [VIA Rail] could do to fix that train and move it as quickly as possible." An alternative was also discussed: having train 37 (travelling from Québec to Ottawa) pull train 622 to its destination. This option was abandoned shortly after and train 37 was permitted to

5 Written response provided to TRAN by VIA Rail Canada Inc.

6 Written response provided to TRAN by VIA Rail Canada Inc.

7 Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities (TRAN), *Evidence*, 44th Parliament, 1st Session, Cédryk Coderre, Passenger, as an Individual.

8 Written response provided to TRAN by VIA Rail Canada Inc.; and Rita Toporowski, Chief Service Delivery Officer, VIA Rail Canada Inc. (VIA Rail).

proceed, given that train 24 was facing the correct direction and had fewer passengers on it. Train 24 was also considered able to push train 622 to its destination if needed.[9]

Mr. Péloquin explained to the Committee that train 622 had come to a stop on an elevated stretch of railbed near a small forest. As a result, even though the highway was close by, it was not safe to disembark passengers, particularly given the varying mobility needs of everyone on board. Mr. Coderre confirmed also coming to that conclusion while on the train.

At 2:49 pm, an internal email advised that an electrical connection between trains 24 and 622 was not working and that train 622 had lost power. It was decided that train 24 would push train 622 to Québec.[10] Mr. Péloquin explained that the power outage "lasted less than two hours" while the locomotive engine stopped running. He acknowledged that washrooms and air conditioning systems were not functional during this time, for approximately 90 minutes. Mr. Coderre reported that passengers continued to use the toilets even though they were not functional, adding "that got pretty smelly at one point."

According to Ms. Toporowski, passengers were offered food throughout the day, until the onboard emergency snacks were depleted. Water was also provided, except during the approximately 90 minutes during which the power was out. Mr. Péloquin added that additional emergency supplies, including food and water, have been stocked on VIA Rail trains since the events of December 2022. The comparison with these events will be discussed in more detail in a later section of this report. Nevertheless, he told the committee that "there's not enough to last forever," adding that additional supplies were ordered for the train.

According to Mr. Coderre, passengers were told after the second mechanical breakdown that they could go to the galley for chocolate and alcohol. Approximately three hours into the delay, he recalled asking if there was anything other than pretzels and being told that "there were no more cookies or anything else."

Internal emails show that the process of connecting trains 24 and 622 began around 3:30 pm and was completed by 4:12 pm, at which time power in both trains had been restored.[11] According to Mr. Coderre, passengers received "pretty frequent communication about what was going on," including the plan of connecting with train 24. He noted, however, that the conductor's initial announcement gave the

9 Written response provided to TRAN by VIA Rail Canada Inc.

10 Written response provided to TRAN by VIA Rail Canada Inc.

11 Written response provided to TRAN by VIA Rail Canada Inc.

impression that this would be his first time attempting this type of connection, which Mr. Coderre found to be "a bit worrying." He also described passengers at this point becoming "a bit restless," with some looking into the possibility of calling an Uber and using the emergency exits. He also reported that rumours circulated about a fight on one of the other cars. While he had no first-hand information on the actual incident, he did see police arrive and escort someone off the train.

At 5:15 pm, an internal email indicated that a mechanical technical advisor had "changed out the brake pipe" and the locomotive engineers were performing brake tests.[12]

At 5:30 pm, VIA Rail's Operations Control Centre initiated a second internal conference call, which lasted three hours, to discuss options and solutions.[13]

Internal emails show that both trains then began moving towards Laurier-Station around 6:15 pm to reach a safer location, with the plan being to transfer as many passengers as possible from train 622 to train 24. Train 26 (travelling from Ottawa to Québec) would then pick up any remaining passengers. The emails also show that the Operations Control Centre had attempted to organise buses but had not been able to secure any.[14] The committee heard that ten bus companies had been contacted, with no success.[15]

Ms. Toporowski further explained that, once it had been determined that food supplies would run out, pizza was ordered for delivery to Laurier-Station, in anticipation of the train being backed up to a safer location that would allow distribution on board. Mr. Coderre confirmed having received a "generous" portion of pizza (four slices) at the same time that firefighters arrived to help secure the area to transfer passengers to train 26.

At approximately 6:45 pm, VIA Rail notified Transport Canada officials, including the Deputy Minister, the office of the Minister of Transport, as well as the VIA Rail board of directors, of the situation abord train 622.[16]

A further internal email confirmed that train 26 began moving at 8:38 pm with all remaining passengers aboard. It also indicated that "a few of the passengers decided to

12 Written response provided to TRAN by VIA Rail Canada Inc.

13 Written response provided to TRAN by VIA Rail Canada Inc.

14 Written response provided to TRAN by VIA Rail Canada Inc.; and Toporowski (VIA Rail).

15 TRAN, *Evidence*: Toporowski (VIA Rail).

16 TRAN, *Evidence*: Mario Péloquin, President and Chief Executive Office, VIA Rail Canada Inc. (VIA Rail); and Lisa Setlakwe Assistant Deputy Minister, Safety and Security, Department of Transport (Transport Canada).

stand."[17] Mr. Coderre also reported that "some of the passengers had to stand up because there were not enough seats on train 26."

A final internal email confirms the arrival of all passengers in the city of Québec:

- Train 26 arrived at 9:44 pm, one hour and 25 minutes behind schedule;
- Train 24 arrived ten minutes later, five hours and 42 minutes behind schedule; and
- Passengers from train 622 who were aboard these two trains arrived in Québec respectively nine hours and 56 minutes and ten hours and six minutes behind schedule.[18]

While he did not have any connecting travel plans, Mr. Coderre indicated that several passengers on train 622 were on their way to connect with a cruise in Québec and that VIA Rail staff were making efforts to take down their names and find them.

According to Mr. Péloquin, the Minister of Transport's office "responded on Sunday [1 September] early afternoon and [he] had a call organized with the minister for Tuesday [3 September] at 12:30." Arun Thangaraj, Deputy Minister with the Department of Transport, confirmed that he also spoke with both Mr. Péloquin and with the chair of VIA Rail's board of directors at the time of their call with the minister.

COMPARISON WITH INCIDENTS OVER THE 2022–2023 HOLIDAY PERIOD

Mr. Péloquin told the committee that this situation was reminiscent of the incidents over the 2022–2023 winter holiday period.[19] While he confirmed that VIA Rail had implemented "the key learnings and recommendations from 2022," he admitted that "significant shortcomings" had now been revealed and were being addressed.

The 2022 incidents and the investigations that followed helped improve several of VIA Rail's procedures and protocols, including its communications protocols, both internally

17 Written response provided to TRAN by VIA Rail Canada Inc.

18 Written response provided to TRAN by VIA Rail Canada Inc.

19 The committee held special meetings in the immediate aftermath to study travel delays across Canada's transportation sector during this period and incorporated its findings into a report entitled *Strengthening Air Passenger Rights in Canada*.

and with Transport Canada.[20] In addition, Ms. Toporowski indicated that VIA Rail's protocols on alternate transportation, as well as on visibility of staff ("offering food and water on board the trains, as an example") were updated. In her view, these new protocols were followed on 31 August 2024.

Additional emergency supplies, including food and water, were also stocked on board trains following the 2022 incidents.[21]

Mr. Péloquin stressed, however, the differences between the incidents in December 2022 and on 31 August 2024. The former, he explained, was due to an ice storm which caused widespread transportation issues and prevented emergency crews from reaching a train that had been stranded with a tree having fallen on it.

IDENTIFYING WHAT WENT WRONG

VIA Rail representatives were clear that, in their view, the delays experienced by passengers on 31 August 2024 were "unacceptable,"[22] a view that was shared by the Honourable Anita Anand, who was Minister of Transport at the time of her testimony. The committee heard several views from witnesses on exactly what went wrong on that day.

Communication and Escalation Protocols

Ms. Toporowski told the committee that, "although the communication on board the train was frequent, the unfortunate part was that the information regarding where the rescue would happen and at what time it would happen was lacking. That's what caused many issues on board the train." Mr. Coderre confirmed this view, indicating that passengers received frequent updates, but that these had little to no substance to them. In one instance, the update advised passengers that there was currently no plan but that one was being developed: "In my opinion, that's pretty worrying when you have to go somewhere and you're being told that they have no plan." Jennifer Murray, Director, Atlantic Region for Unifor, suggested that the lack of substantive updates would likely have been "frustrating" for staff as well.

Ms. Toporowski also identified VIA Rail's protocol in terms of escalation as a point of failure, as escalation ought to have occurred sooner in the process. She explained that

20 TRAN, *Evidence*: Péloquin (VIA Rail).

21 TRAN, *Evidence*: Péloquin (VIA Rail).

22 TRAN, *Evidence*: Péloquin (VIA Rail); and Toporowski (VIA Rail).

VIA Rail should have internally escalated the situation to continue problem-solving, while separately "asking what we can do creatively to get emergency services or somebody else involved to support this." Mr. Péloquin also expressed the view that steps would have been taken earlier to evacuate the passengers "if the communication protocol had worked properly." Although he also repeated that evacuation would have been unsafe in the location where the train came to a stop following the second mechanical breakdown.

Mr. Péloquin explained that different escalation processes exist depending on the situation. Broadly, however, the chief of the division (in this case, Ms. Toporowski) is alerted, and she alerts Mr. Péloquin, who may then advise the office of the Minister of Transport, the Deputy Minister of Transport, and the board directors of VIA Rail. Depending on the situation, protocol may require the local chief of police to be contacted. As Ms. Toporowski explained, this is handled by the Operations Control Centre.

Mr. Péloquin confirmed that "VIA Rail executives are available at all times to receive calls or other forms of communication." He also pointed out that VIA Rail regularly deals with situations that can result in delays, given that the Crown corporation operates "on a network of over 20,000 kilometres across the country, with mixed traffic and so on," and that it therefore has experience to "deal efficiently with all types of situations every day."

Minister Anand explained that, as of 3 September 2024, the newly updated escalation protocol would also require Transport Canada to be "immediately informed of disruptive events" and for VIA Rail to begin arranging alternative transportation options for passengers "if a delay is over two hours." She added that a tabletop simulation test of VIA Rail's crisis management plan was conducted on 7 October 2024, with another planned for November. Mr. Thangaraj also indicated that VIA Rail has committed to ensuring "24-7 support to communicate information to passengers and to the public," with more updated protocols to be provided.

Mr. Péloquin explained that, at the time of the 31 August incident, VIA Rail protocol required the Operations Control Centre to notify Transport Canada "if there's an event that is not usual: significant train delays, collisions, incidents, accidents and so on." Following discussions with Mr. Thangaraj, it has since been determined that Mr. Péloquin will himself advise the deputy minister, then he or a colleague would advise the office of the Minister of Transport in the event of an "abnormal" situation. This, he told the committee, "is above and beyond what we had agree to before, a few years ago."

According to Lisa Setlakwe, Assistant Deputy Minister, Safety and Security at the Department of Transport, VIA Rail did not follow the protocol that was in place at the

time, as it waited too long before notifying Transport Canada. Following notification, however, she confirmed communication continued regularly throughout the situation.[23] She also confirmed that this protocol has since been strengthened and clarified that VIA Rail is typically "very good at communicating with [Transport Canada]."

The department's role upon being advised of a situation is to ensure that VIA Rail is taking necessary steps to protect the health and safety of passengers, but officials were clear that operational decisions, such as evacuating passengers and ensuring an adequate supply of food and water, fall to VIA Rail.[24]

According to a written response from the department, Transport Canada was advised by VIA Rail of 54 service delays between 10 October 2023 and 10 October 2024, and was made aware of an additional ten service delays from other partners such as the Transportation Safety Board, CN Rail, Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC), and through the Transport Canada inspectorate.[25]

Mechanical Breakdown

Mr. Péloquin told the committee that a comprehensive assessment of the issue was underway. At the time of his testimony on 19 September 2024, he indicated that it would be "premature and unwise […] to speculate on the root causes of the mechanical failure." Though he confirmed that it was not a single failure, but rather "a series of events." Ms. Toporowski also was of the view that this was "an isolated incident" since two mechanical failures occurred on the same train.

Minister Anand told the committee that "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."

Training

Minister Anand told the committee that she expected improvements to be made to VIA Rail's training procedures. She stated that improvements put in place following December 2022 "weren't followed in 2024. Management, crew, employees will take more training." She added that VIA Rail executives and employees who are responsible

23 TRAN, *Evidence*: Setlakwe (Transport Canada).

24 TRAN, *Evidence*: Setlakwe (Transport Canada); and Arun Thangaraj, Deputy Minister, Department of Transport.

25 Written response provided to TRAN by Transport Canada.

for operations had already, in September 2024, participated in in-person training sessions focused on emergency and crisis management plans.

Mr. Péloquin explained that VIA Rail personnel receive "fantastic" training, both initially upon being hired, and on an ongoing basis. He indicated that passenger feedback is very positive with regards to staff, both in general and specifically on 31 August 2024: "Our employees on board did a tremendous job during this event. We heard this from a number of the passengers on board, even though they weren't happy to have been on the train for such a long time." Mr. Coderre also shared this view, stating that despite the lack of substantive updates, "the staff in our car were pretty awesome."

While there were no serious incidents in his car, Mr. Coderre reported overhearing conversations suggesting that "the staff had it rough with some of the passengers in the other cars." Ms. Murray expressed concern that frontline workers are not sufficiently consulted to ensure they are properly supported when faced with "harassing-type behaviour from understandably frustrated passengers."

Although this incident took place on a holiday weekend, Mr. Péloquin confirmed that the staff complement was not reduced, either on the train, nor in the Operations Control Centre.

Ms. Murray stated that, by "implementing regressive billing changes, charging people for additional baggage, limiting access to free amenities, attempting to cut back on employees who serve travellers and providing minimum support in case of delays," VIA Rail was failing to fulfil its mission of putting "passengers first." She also strongly disagreed with the need to review staff training requirements, arguing that VIA Rail already operates "very lean": "[t]raining is not the fix when VIA Rail has not properly stocked the train." Joel Kennedy, Director, Rail Sector at Unifor, similarly stated that "[t]his is a funding problem, not a training problem. I will emphasize that our members are the ones who are holding this train together in these types of situations, with very few resources."

Mr. Kennedy added, however, that staff receive training only for delays of two to three hours and that, for longer situations, they "often look to management in the company for direction on how to govern those situations." As such, he reiterated the importance of ensuring adequate "planning, training, and proper resources" to support staff in these situations. He clarified that, in his view, the issue related more to VIA Rail's allocation of its resources, rather than government investment.

On this issue, Minister Anand told the committee that the Government of Canada has taken VIA Rail "very seriously" and has made substantial investments in its new fleet. She added that if VIA Rail requests additional funding, it will be considered, but that

"there are things that VIA Rail can do right now to make sure that this situation doesn't happen again."

Mr. Kennedy stated that "[i]t is the employer's responsibility to keep the health and safety of our members in check. That is their responsibility under the labour code, under the law, so yes, I would say that their lack of investment absolutely put our members in harm's way that day."

Food and Water

Ms. Toporowski explained that protocol required food service (including meals) to continue in the event of a delay. After 45 minutes, and every 45 minutes following that, emergency snacks are provided in the form of "protein bars, pretzels, and/or cookies," along with water. She confirmed that this protocol "was adhered to." Mr. Péloquin explained that, while measures are being taken to ensure adequate supplies of food and water, the other protocols being put in place will help ensure this type of situation does not happen in the first place.

Ms. Murray acknowledged that there was a finite amount of space, but she argued that there should be room for emergency supplies that are more substantive than pretzels: "We're transporting humans here, and there has to be a way to provide them with the necessities that they need when there are significant delays such as these." She also expressed the view that supplies were not being properly stocked regardless of the length of the delay. On the issue of a finite amount of space, Mr. Kennedy stated "this is a train. We can couple another car onto it that's possibly refrigerated or has some space to allow the storage that is needed."

Mr. Coderre estimated that, by the time passengers on train 622 received pizza, six or seven hours had gone by since he had been provided breakfast on the train. He also noted that, while he received breakfast in business class, not all passengers were provided this meal. Mr. Coderre suggested that there should be enough supplies on board a train to cover a delay of "at least 12 hours," and that these supplies should be "something more substantial than pretzels and chocolate." He also suggested that "going forward, Via Rail should plan to order pizza, water and other supplies sooner, instead of waiting eight hours to do so."

Mr. Coderre and Ms. Murray both agreed to a suggestion that VIA Rail store freeze-dried meals as emergency supplies.

Infrastructure

As Mr. Péloquin told committee members, VIA Rail owns no more than 3% of the tracks on which it operates. On these few stretches, such as between Montréal and Ottawa, it has control over train movements and infrastructure maintenance and its trains typically arrive on schedule 97% of the time. This is not the case on the remaining 97% of its network, on which VIA Rail has no say regarding track maintenance.

However, Mr. Péloquin told the committee that, in the case of train 622, the possibility of getting assistance from CN was always guaranteed:

> I can tell you that over the 150 years or so that the railways have been operating in Canada, there's never been an issue whereby a railroad did not offer assistance when another railroad had a problem, no matter what the branding was on the side of the locomotive.

He also acknowledged that an immobilised VIA Rail train "can have an impact on the logistics of moving freight traffic around, so we work very closely together [with CN and CPKC]."

Ms. Murray told committee members that chronic VIA Rail delays are broadly due to "lack of planning for delays of all sorts along our rail system: delays caused by climate change-related weather events, breakdowns, train blockages and freight traffic." She argued that, since VIA Rail relies on tracks owned by other companies, the Crown corporation should ensure the availability of resources to deal with service interruptions "caused by underinvestment in the rail sector that results in low levels of resilience in our rail infrastructure." She stressed the potential impact of climate change-related weather events on rail tracks, particularly in remote and northern areas. Mr. Kennedy recommended dedicated passenger rail tracks as well as twinned tracks for emergency situations.

WHAT STEPS ARE BEING TAKEN?

Mr. Péloquin insisted that, while this was "an isolated incident," the situation faced on train 622 "is a serious lesson whose causes and consequences will be scrupulously analyzed to make VIA Rail a carrier that lives up to [its] customers' expectations." He added for context that VIA Rail has "about 20,000 train starts every year, with 80% of those train trips arriving on time or within 30 minutes of their scheduled arrival time."

Ms. Murray disagreed that this type of delay was isolated, arguing that "this happens more than it should." Mr. Coderre told the committee that "a 12-hour delay isn't a

common occurrence on a Via Rail train, but delays of an hour or two are fairly common." He also explained that, when taking the train to get to the Montréal airport, he plans a buffer of six to eight hours to allow for train delays to avoid missing his flight.

Immediate Actions Taken

According to Mr. Péloquin, VIA Rail executives communicated internally to point out targeted shortcomings to correct immediately, including determining what caused such an extensive delay. At the time of his testimony, he told the committee that VIA Rail had already put in place the following corrective measures in anticipation of further investigations:

- In the event of any situation likely to cause a significant delay on a train in the Québec—Windsor corridor, VIA Rail "will assess the situation in real time and implement an evacuation procedure, if feasible."
- An immediate review of VIA Rail's training requirements "to ensure that all employees are better equipped for difficult situations."
- A review of VIA Rail's communications protocol with Transport Canada officials, "to enable a more rapid exchange in the event of major issues."
- A comprehensive assessment of the new fleet of trains currently being deployed in the Québec—Windsor corridor.

Ms. Setlakwe confirmed that, given the safety issues involved, Transport Canada had already undertaken an inspection and did not find any issues of regulatory non-compliance.

Letter from the Minister of Transport

Minister Anand told the committee that her predecessor, the Honourable Pablo Rodriguez, had met with VIA Rail executives and that the Department of Transport had "demanded that VIA Rail take concrete steps and report back […] to ensure this type of thing does not happen again." Specifically, she stated that improvements are needed with respect to VIA Rail's employee training, on board communications protocols for providing updates to passengers, and procedures for train breakdowns to ensure that passengers "receive a basic standard of care and are treated with dignity." She added that her office had requested "a robust, updated emergency management action plan" from VIA Rail within 30 days. The Minister stressed that, while VIA Rail is a Crown

corporation and therefore independent and "operationally separate" from the Department of Transport, the Government of Canada is its sole shareholder and "can therefore set the broad policy parameters under which VIA Rail operates."

Mr. Péloquin again confirmed that he had a conversation with the Minister of Transport (at the time, Minister Rodriguez) on Tuesday, 3 September 2024 and shortly thereafter received the letter outlining the minister's expectations. At the time of his testimony, VIA Rail had provided an interim response to that letter highlighting actions already taken, with the intention of providing a full response within the 30-day timeline.

Minister Anand confirmed that since becoming Minister of Transport she had also spoken separately with Mr. Péloquin and with the chair of VIA Rail, and that it is common practice for the Minister of Transport to provide a letter of expectations to any incoming chair of the board of VIA Rail.

Investigations

Although the first cause of the mechanical issue has already been identified, Mr. Péloquin confirmed that VIA Rail was working with Siemens to identify the causes of the second breakdown, which ultimately was responsible for the longer delay. As previously mentioned, train 622 was one of VIA Rail's new Siemens trainsets which, as of September 2024, were being commissioned at a rate of roughly one per month. VIA Rail is being supported in this transition by Siemens teams in Montréal and in Sacramento, California.[26]

Mr. Péloquin indicated that VIA Rail is "about halfway" through reception of its new Siemens trains. He described it as "a complex process to receive a train, test it, commission it and put it into service," but that VIA Rail had a good collaborative relationship with the supplier. Based on his previous experience, he estimated that the reception process was "on par with what we can expect with the delivery of new rolling stock."

Stephen Scott, Director General, Rail Safety and Security with the Department of Transport, and Ms. Setlakwe confirmed with the committee that Transport Canada was "not aware of a systemic issue with the fleet at this time." Ms. Setlakwe indicated that VIA Rail staff were not equipped to repair the first mechanical issue on site but that both issues had been resolved. Mr. Scott also confirmed that all new rail fleets were subject to

26 TRAN, *Evidence*: Péloquin (VIA Rail).

regulatory requirements to demonstrate they meet safety standards and that this process included due diligence by the department along with dry-run inspections.

Mr. Péloquin confirmed with the committee that VIA Rail had commissioned an independent investigation to determine what went wrong. After receiving a report, the Crown corporation planned to carry out an in-depth review of its emergency management action plan "to ensure that such a situation does not happen again." Denis Lavoie, VIA Rail's General Counsel, indicated that results, findings, and recommendations were expected in the fall of 2024.

As previously mentioned, Minister Anand told the committee that VIA Rail executives and employees who were responsible for operations had already participated in in-person training sessions focused on emergency and crisis management plans. She also confirmed that two independent reports commissioned by VIA Rail, one on operational gaps and one on the mechanical failures, were expected to be delivered by the end of November 2024.

Mr Péloquin confirmed that the design of VIA Rail's new long-distance train cars was not yet complete and that the Crown corporation would work with manufacturers to incorporate any lessons learned from the current situation into the new design.

Mr. Kennedy recommended a review of both VIA Rail's internal emergency preparedness plans and protocols, as well as related government regulations. In particular, he referred to the example of coach buses such as Greyhound, which will immediately dispatch another bus in the event of a breakdown. When asked about the possibility of stationing surplus locomotives along rail lines in case of emergencies, as is done in the United Kingdom, Mr. Péloquin replied that this would not be feasible for VIA Rail. "We don't have a supplement of locomotives that we could store all over the country in case of an emergency. We use the majority of the rolling stock that we have every day."

Mr. Kennedy confirmed that, at the time of his testimony on 3 October 2024, Unifor had not been approached to participate in any consultations to provide staff perspectives. He also confirmed that Unifor was not consulted on the changes made following the December 2022 incidents. Ms. Murray suggested it would be "a very good idea for VIA to engage in this type of conversation with our staff and with their workers. It is really important that they hear how this can be approached and done better. It is VIA that will be implementing these things, and it should certainly demonstrate to the workers that it cares enough to hear from them."

Ms. Setlakwe confirmed that Transport Canada would take into account the results of the independent reports commissioned by VIA Rail but that the department would be conducting its own analysis into train 622's mechanical problems. Mr. Scott added that,

as a regulator, Transport Canada had "tools and measures" to impose any extra action it felt needed to be taken from a safety perspective.

Passenger Compensation

Ms. Toporowski reported that VIA Rail's compensation policy is to provide either 50% or 100% travel credits, based on "the degree of the delay." Given the severity of the delay experienced by passengers on train 622, a full refund was also offered, "recognizing the fact that it was unacceptable from a service-level perspective and from a well-being perspective."

Mr. Coderre confirmed having received this compensation. He clarified that the travel credit provided expires after 12 months, which he found "unfortunate" as "most of the passengers who were on the train are probably not going to use the travel credit within 12 months."

Ms. Toporowski explained that VIA Rail responds directly to all complaints received, whether by email, voicemail, through its call centres, or mailed directly to executives. At the time of her testimony, she confirmed that 43 complaints had been received from passengers on board train 622, in addition to several complaints from individuals who had not been directly affected by the delays. VIA Rail has also reached out to 30 passengers at random from various cars on the train, "to find out the level of service, how we performed in terms of our protocols, which ones were adhered to and where they found failings."

When asked, Mr. Coderre told the committee that he was not made aware of any complaint resolution process, nor of any process by which he might seek to obtain greater compensation.

When asked if they would support the establishment of a passenger bill of rights for rail transportation, similar to the *Air Passenger Protection Regulations*, both Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Coderre replied that they would. On this question, Mr. Thangaraj stated: "As an operator, I think [VIA Rail is] 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."

APPENDIX A:
LIST OF WITNESSES

The following table lists the witnesses who appeared before the committee at its meetings related to this report. Transcripts of all public meetings related to this report are available on the committee's webpage for this study.

44th Parliament – 1st Session

Organizations and Individuals	Date	Meeting
VIA Rail Canada Inc.	2024/09/19	126
Denis Lavoie, General Counsel		
Mario Péloquin, President and Chief Executive Officer		
Rita Toporowski, Chief Service Delivery Officer		
As an individual	2024/10/03	129
Cedryk Coderre, Passenger		
Unifor	2024/10/03	129
Joel Kennedy, Director, Rail Sector		
Jennifer Murray, Director, Atlantic Region		
Department of Transport	2024/10/10	131
Hon. Anita Anand, P.C., M.P., Minister of Transport		
Craig Hutton, Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Policy		
Stephen Scott, Director General, Rail Safety and Security		
Lisa Setlakwe, Assistant Deputy Minister, Safety and Security		
Arun Thangaraj, Deputy Minister		

REQUEST FOR GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee requests that the government table a comprehensive response to this Report.

A copy of the relevant *Minutes of Proceedings* (Meeting No. 12) from the 45th Parliament, 1st Session and (Meetings Nos. 126, 129 and 131) from the 44th Parliament, 1st Session is tabled.

Respectfully submitted,

Peter Schiefke
Chair