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# Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities

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Chair: Peter Schiefke





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Wednesday, March 11, 2026

• (1630)

[English]

**The Chair (Peter Schiefke (Vaudreuil, Lib.)):** Welcome to meeting number 25 of the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, December 11, the committee is resuming its study on improving Via Rail security and customer service.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. I'd like to make a few comments for the benefit of our witnesses and our members.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French. Those in the room can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

I will remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair. For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For members on Zoom, please use the "raise hand" function. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best as we can. We appreciate your patience and understanding in this regard.

Colleagues, I'd like to now welcome our witnesses for the first panel today.

[Translation]

From the Coalition pour le retour des services d'un train de passagers en Gaspésie, we have Ms. Micheline St-Onge.

Welcome.

[English]

From Via Rail Canada Inc., we have Mathieu Paquette, interim president and chief executive officer; Graham Blackwell, vice-president, mechanical operations and asset management; Marie-Flore Ducrot, customer experience and network operations; and Denis Lavoie, chief legal, risk and safety officer.

Welcome. Thank you for taking time to appear before us today.

We're going to proceed with our opening remarks.

[Translation]

Ms. St-Onge, go ahead for five minutes.

**Micheline St-Onge (Spokesperson, Coalition pour le retour des services d'un train de passagers en Gaspésie):** Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and honourable members.

The Gaspésie passenger train is a lifeline. Since 1902, the passenger train connecting Gaspésie to the rest of Canada has been an essential form of public transportation for the region and enjoys a fine reputation in Canada and abroad.

The service deteriorated continuously from the 1980s onwards and was finally discontinued in 2013.

The Coalition pour le retour des services d'un train de passagers en Gaspésie is calling on the committee and the Minister of Transport to take action to end the lack of consideration that travellers have experienced since the 1980s. The coalition has some potential solutions to improve service across eastern Canada.

The closure of train stations started in 1982. Although 80,500 passengers took the Gaspésie train in 1984-85, seven stations closed without due regard to their social role. For example, the Maria train station closed down, even though it was serving the only hospital in the entire Baie-des-Chaleurs. Other closures followed in 1986, 2000 and 2013, leaving only five train stations.

In 1990, VIA Rail reduced its round trips from seven to three per week. Ridership dropped by half to 42,000 passengers.

February 2009 was a deeply challenging month, with only 5 out of 12 trains serving Gaspé. The other trains were forced to turn around at New Carlisle, 175 kilometres from the terminus. On February 23, Gaspésians were forced to give up all their carriages to the *Ocean* train connecting Montreal to Halifax when they were 56 kilometres from Montreal, and travel 862 kilometres by bus in the middle of the night.

In 2013, the Gaspésie train known as the *Chaleur* had fewer sleeper cabins, no dining cars, and no panoramic dome cars, even though it carried approximately 28,000 more passengers than in 2011. Passengers felt humiliated and poorly treated.

On December 10, 2011, service between New Carlisle and Gaspé was suspended due to the poor state of a bridge. On December 23, upon receipt of a status report on structures, VIA Rail commissioned another report and discontinued service from Matapédia. Partial service was restored after five months.

In 2013, service was halted east of Matapedia due to problems at level crossings. The *Chaleur* train was placed on the siding on arrival in Matapedia and passengers were forced to retrieve their luggage on their own and to walk on the tracks to the train station. They had to fend for themselves and felt disrespected. There were about 20 people, including children.

On August 23, VIA Rail stated that service between Matapedia and New Carlisle would resume as soon as the company was assured that the tracks were safe again. Even though safety reports were conclusive, VIA Rail kept asking for more reports. Requirements seem to be higher for Gaspésie than any other part of Canada.

In 2016, the Quebec government proposed a plan to repair the tracks at New Carlisle, and VIA Rail committed to resuming operations as soon as the work was completed.

In 2017, despite its commitments, VIA Rail refused to resume services gradually due to a lack of resources.

Right now, eastern Canada does not have a train to Gaspésie. The train goes through the Lower St. Lawrence in the middle of the night and frequently arrives in Halifax late.

In 2025, all elected officials in Gaspésie expressed support for a gradual resumption of service.

In January, an access to information request from VIA Rail revealed that in 2024, at least 2,643 passengers from Gaspésie travelled hundreds of kilometres to get to a train station. A report from the Integrated Health and Social Services Centre shows that in 2024, over 10,000 people had to travel outside the region to seek specialized health care and that the train was the preferred mode of travel on these trips.

Following a \$335-million investment, the tracks are now ready up to Port-Daniel—Gascons. Many of the questions that came up during the 2025 annual general meeting touched on the gradual return of the Gaspésie train. Unfortunately, the president responded that this was a logistical issue and that he did not want to or could not reverse course on the train.

We presented a petition to the House of Commons that had gathered 3,437 signatures in three months from people in 9 Canadian provinces and 46 living outside Canada.

For the past 40 years, passengers to and from Gaspésie have been fighting for decent service. Despite significant mobilization, there has been no commitment to a gradual return, even though VIA Rail offered this service to New Carlisle in 2012 and 2013.

On January 7, 2026, the freight train operated up to Port-Daniel—Gascons for the first time since 2011. However, where is the passenger train?

Gaspésie needs a passenger train that addresses regional needs. We want a train, and we want a Montreal-Port-Daniel—Gascons route now and a Montreal-Gaspé route as soon as possible. We want a daily, daytime train with few stops between Montreal and Rivière-du-Loup to serve the Lower St. Lawrence and Gaspésie and allow the *Océan* train to make fewer stops in the municipalities it passes in the middle of the night.

• (1635)

If VIA Rail can't offer this service for logistical reasons, we want a protected budget and a pilot project starting this fall, because the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie can manage the project.

Thank you for your attention.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. St-Onge.

Mr. Paquette, you now have the floor for five minutes.

**Mathieu Paquette (Interim President and Chief Executive Officer, VIA Rail Canada Inc.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Mr. Chair, members of the committee, thank you for welcoming us here today.

I've been asked to step in as the interim CEO at Via Rail at a moment when trust in passenger rail is being tested. My mandate is clear: Improve the performance of our trains, provide a service people can count on and maintain trust.

I'm here to be transparent on progress and accountable for results. That means trains leaving on time, equipment that performs to expectations and respectful care for passengers, including when things do not go as planned.

I'm joined today by Marie-Flore Ducrot, vice-president, customer experience, railway and network operations; by Graham Blackwell, vice-president, mechanical operations; and by Denis Lavoie, chief legal officer.

Together we are here to speak plainly about what happened on December 10, what we are doing to prevent similar incidents and how we will continue to earn the trust of our clients.

[Translation]

To be clear, the events that occurred on December 10 are unacceptable to us. The passengers who were affected deserve a sincere apology, and I want to express that to them once again. I know this committee has heard similar statements from my predecessors. I understand that trust is being tested today.

We always learn lessons every time an incident occurs and we strengthen our emergency response framework. However, the incident involving train 669 shows us that that is not enough. We must do more than just improve our processes. We need to deliver results, now.

• (1640)

[English]

Reliability is the foundation of trust. That's why ensuring that our service is dependable is my number one priority and the top priority of our entire leadership team. Via Rail operates in a complex environment and some constraints are outside of our direct control, but where we do have control, we must raise the bar—and we will.

Following the December incident, expectations on fleet reliability have been expressed very clearly to our supplier, Siemens. Short-term measures are in place to address immediate issues, and we're working together to develop long-term improvements.

[Translation]

Before answering your questions, I want to remind you of our public service mandate.

VIA Rail serves communities from coast to coast, both major centres and regions. Gaspésie is an important example of this. Our intention to return there has never changed.

We are open to the idea of planning a partial return, but several conditions still need to be met to achieve this. That is why I will be visiting the region very soon to engage directly with the concerned communities.

[English]

In closing, I want to put the December 10 incident into context, without minimizing it in any way.

In the Quebec City-Windsor corridor alone, Via Rail runs over 19,000 departures a year, and most trips unfold without incident. What happened on December 10 demands full accountability. My commitment is the following: We'll track our progress, using clear performance indicators. We will have more open dialogue with the communities we serve, and we will be transparent with Canadians about where we are making progress and where we are falling short.

Our duty now is simple: Deliver a service people can count on and prove through action that we deserve the trust of our clients.

Thank you for your attention.

[Translation]

We are now ready to answer your questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Paquette.

[English]

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

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

**Philip Lawrence (Northumberland—Clarke, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll start on a positive note. Via has responded every time we've invited them, and every time the CEO has come. We do appreciate that as a committee. However, my questions won't be as easy.

It's like Groundhog Day. In my riding in Coburg, we had people stuck for I believe it was 48 hours or so on a train. We've had incidents in Quebec and Ontario where we've had people stranded, people without access to washrooms, people without food to eat, other than a couple of bits of trail mix, for hours on end. This is a very serious issue. I appreciate your coming here and taking accountability and responsibility, but you'll excuse my skepticism if I see these issues.

You're right. There are certain things that are not controllable, but you should be able to control certain things. One of them is that

the government gave you over \$1 billion to get new trains. You got these trains from Siemens. The industry standard is to have 90% fleet availability. My understanding from reports is that you have 50% availability.

What went wrong with the procurement, and how are you going to fix it?

**Mathieu Paquette:** Thank you for your question.

Fleet reliability is not yet where we want it to be. As I mentioned, we have reset expectations clearly. En route reliability of the Venture fleet is at 98%. Our focus now is on the remaining 2%. I will ask my colleague, Mr. Blackwell, to give you more details on what we do working with Siemens.

**Graham Blackwell (Vice-President, Mechanical Operations and Asset Management, VIA Rail Canada Inc.):** Availability, reliability and safety of our assets are the missions of mechanical operations. Siemens, like any one of our providers, is an important support to that availability and reliability. Since the December 10 incident, we've focused with them on engineering solutions and operational mitigations that we immediately put into place, and on ongoing software and hardware upgrades that immediately improved fleet reliability.

This is our focus for all of our fleet, whether it's a 50-year-old legacy car that's going to Vancouver or it's the new Venture fleet. We're accountable for the reliability of that fleet, and we'll continue to work with Siemens to push them, to pull them along, to make sure we reach that availability and to make sure we have the materials and everything we need to succeed for our clients.

• (1645)

**Philip Lawrence:** Thank you for that. According to some of the reports, the fleet availability is much lower than what you're stating, but we'll continue on. According to a series of reports, the reason that the trains have broken down is Canadian cold weather. It would seem to me that it would be eminently knowable that in Canada winters are cold, and then you would acquire trains.

Was there any winter testing done on these trains before you procured them?

**Denis Lavoie (Chief Legal, Risk and Safety Officer, VIA Rail Canada Inc.):** Yes. Via Rail bought these trains from Siemens back in 2018, and, yes, before those trains entered into service, we went through a full commissioning period. A winter test was part of that commissioning phase.

**Philip Lawrence:** Is the information not correct that cold weather has played a role in some of these mechanical breakdowns? Is that true?

**Mathieu Paquette:** Reliability in wintertime is not where it should be, and it's not meeting our expectations and the expectations of our passengers. I want to be clear on this. We know that winter is coming and winter will be back.

**Philip Lawrence:** With all due respect, my question, then, is why this was not caught before these trains were ever put on the rails and passengers were stranded for hours on end. How is it that there was not a vetting process? Presumably, there will be more trains that we will need to buy and that taxpayers will need to pay for. What processes are you going to put in place to make sure these trains operate in the Canadian winters?

**Mathieu Paquette:** Thank you for your question.

Again, when we purchased that fleet, there was some winter testing done at the time. For me, my mandate is clear. It's focusing on what I can control. Right now, we're working closely with Siemens to make sure the reliability of the fleet is meeting our expectations and those of the passengers.

**Philip Lawrence:** Just this winter in a week in February, you had 30 different train cancellations. Can you tell us for sure that next winter we won't have any trains stranded, and that we won't have any cancellations going forward?

**Mathieu Paquette:** Cancellations are not taken lightly. With regard to the week you're making reference to, we were expecting a major winter weather event. It is our responsibility to make sure that we have guard trains ready in case of a disruption on the network. We understand that it has an impact on passengers, but it was our responsibility to take that decision because when—

**Philip Lawrence:** I'm sorry. I have a quick question.

Would you undertake to provide our committee with your plan to increase fleet accessibility for next winter?

**Mathieu Paquette:** I missed the beginning of your question. Could you repeat it?

**Philip Lawrence:** Could you provide us with a written document on your plan to increase fleet accessibility during next winter?

**Mathieu Paquette:** Absolutely. We'll provide that document.

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

[*Translation*]

Thank you. Mr. Paquette.

Mr. Lauzon, you now have the floor for six minutes.

**Stéphane Lauzon (Argenteuil—La Petite-Nation, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I will ask my questions in French.

I will start with Ms. St-Onge from Gaspésie, Quebec.

I'm very proud of your region. I love it and visit on a regular basis.

You have mostly spoken to the benefits of adding a train line to improve access to health care, but you have not said much about the economic impact this could generate.

I've been to your region multiple times and I can say it has consistently high occupancy rates during peak seasons. It can be quite hard to find a hotel room.

Do you think a tourism-related train could put more pressure on your offer of services?

• (1650)

**Micheline St-Onge:** Not necessarily, because the train was there before. There were other hotels and other facilities. The fact that the passenger train is no longer in service obviously means that many people can't come to Gaspésie any more. A lot of people also travel to visit family during the holidays and in summer.

The passenger train was always part of this offer until 2013. Various programs were in place and agreements had been made with travel agencies in Montreal that offered tours to the northern parts of Gaspésie. There was a lot riding on the passenger train and that has all come to an end. We don't have taxis, even though we could easily have some, because right now, there is no demand.

**Stéphane Lauzon:** Do you think the return of a passenger train could increase the service offer and spur new businesses and homes to put up shop in the region?

**Micheline St-Onge:** Absolutely.

**Stéphane Lauzon:** You should not just look at the service offer you have right now.

**Micheline St-Onge:** No, that's right.

**Stéphane Lauzon:** You should also look into your region's growth. Fishing and environmental issues related to fishing come to mind. This is your economic driver. The return of a passenger train could have some benefits for your region.

Can you speak to how the region can be developed further?

**Micheline St-Onge:** My original document was 15 pages long, but I had to cut it down to 2 pages. I only had 5 minutes for my opening remarks and so I had to choose what I wanted to highlight.

Indeed, we need a passenger train to promote the region's economy in every sense of the word. For example, people can come and work as consultants in specific businesses. Some people leave Gaspésie for contracts outside the region. However, they face a disadvantage because they need two days to travel to meet with their clients. The passenger train has a very big impact on the entire economy of Gaspésie.

There is a lot of talk about freight, and indeed, this is an extremely important sector. However, there are also people who work in businesses.

For example, last year, employees at the Port-Daniel—Gascons cement factory almost went on strike because they did not have transportation to go visit their families. Gaspésie is somewhat landlocked and in the absence of train service, you must have a car because the distances are long.

I live in Baie-des-Chaleurs, and it takes three hours for people to travel from Gaspé to my region. The journey to Montreal takes a long time, particularly for those travelling with young children. A passenger train is essential for people across all segments of Gaspésie's population.

**Stéphane Lauzon:** Mr. Paquette, you said that VIA Rail intends to go back to Gaspésie. Ms. St-Onge has spoken to her region's limitations.

What specific conditions must be met to restore train service to Gaspésie? You have the opportunity to share them with us.

**Mathieu Paquette:** Thank you for that question.

First, let me say that VIA Rail's decision to discontinue service in 2013 was not taken lightly. It was taken with a heavy heart. It was done because of the state of the infrastructure in place at the time. VIA Rail has always been committed to coming back once the railway line is rebuilt. We have learned that the Quebec government has decided not to proceed with the reconstruction of the third segment between Port-Daniel—Gascons and Gaspé, and this has forced us to go back to the drawing board.

The passenger train environment is a fairly complex ecosystem. Our passenger experience doesn't start when passengers board the train and it doesn't end when they disembark. We have to look into the quality of the infrastructure. In this case, the track has just been rebuilt. We will be visiting Gaspésie soon to see the state of platforms that passengers use to get on and off the train.

We also need to look at the state of train stations. We don't own train station infrastructure. It belongs to the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie. We need agreements to use tracks and train stations. We can't disembark passengers in the middle of winter and leave them on platforms. We have to tie several factors together. As I said, we are doing some serious work at the drawing board right now to assess the potential to resume service.

**Stéphane Lauzon:** The report has figures on train ridership from 2004 to the time the service was discontinued in 2013. There was a significant drop in passenger numbers. How do you account for that?

My question is for either Ms. St-Onge or Mr. Paquette.

• (1655)

**Mathieu Paquette:** The drop in the passenger numbers is probably partially due to the poor state of infrastructure, which meant that trips took longer.

**Stéphane Lauzon:** The experience was less positive.

**Mathieu Paquette:** The experience was less positive and the connection between the train from Gaspésie and the *Ocean* train made things more complicated.

**Stéphane Lauzon:** Thank you very much.

Ms. St-Onge, I am at your service. It would be a pleasure for me to visit your region to get a better sense of the situation. I will report my observations to the committee.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Lauzon.

Mr. Deschênes, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Alexis Deschênes (Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine—Lis-tuguj, BQ):** Good afternoon, everyone.

Mr. Chair, thank you for welcoming me to the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities.

I would like to thank Ms. St-Onge for joining us. She is from Baie-des-Chaleurs, which is in my riding. I would like to thank her for her presentation and her passionate fight for the return of a passenger train to Gaspésie.

Mr. Paquette, since January 7, trains can once again run between Matapédia and Port-Daniel—Gascons.

Will VIA Rail resume partial service between Matapédia and Port-Daniel—Gascons?

**Mathieu Paquette:** Thank you for your question.

As I have said from the outset, we have always wanted to return to Gaspésie. That has not changed. We are currently looking into the possibility of a gradual resumption of service to Gaspésie. We would like to do that.

That said, we have to look at the entire passenger rail ecosystem, which goes much further than simply running a train. I will be visiting Gaspésie soon to engage with concerned communities and representatives of regional county municipalities, or RCMs, to get a comprehensive picture and a better understanding of the overall situation.

When we reintroduce service, which I have no doubt we are going to do, we need to do so efficiently and safely. That is a priority.

**Alexis Deschênes:** You don't have any doubt that you will restore service between Matapédia and Port-Daniel—Gascons.

Is that correct?

**Mathieu Paquette:** I will say this again: I have no doubt whatsoever.

All this has yet to be determined. I am thinking in particular about where the train will make stops. However, we are evaluating everything right now. It may well be that there will be a stop at New Carlisle, for example, which has what is known as a Y configuration that allows trains to change direction. We are looking at various factors right now.

**Alexis Deschênes:** I am pleased to hear you say that because my perspective on VIA Rail's earlier position is quite different from the way you see things. Ultimately, that's not very important, so let us talk about the future.

My understanding is that you plan to reinstate partial service. As VIA Rail's interim president, you would like to see partial service restored up to Port-Daniel—Gascons.

Is that right?

**Mathieu Paquette:** Yes. As I said, we don't own the infrastructure. The will is there, but we need to confirm with the Quebec government that we can use the tracks, the stations and the platforms. Again, we want to offer all VIA Rail passengers door-to-door experience.

For example, if the train were to go to New Carlisle, we would like to have agreements with regional bus companies so that passengers who want to continue their journey to Gaspé and Percé can use these services.

**Alexis Deschênes:** We've heard about New Carlisle, but is resumption of service up to Port-Daniel—Gascons one of the things you are looking into?

**Mathieu Paquette:** We are looking at all possibilities. Again, as I said, we have to consider a number of factors, and so I can't make a specific commitment.

**Alexis Deschênes:** That means that the one thing we can take away today is that you, as the head of VIA Rail, are sending a message to all of the Crown corporation's employees that VIA Rail is coming back to Gaspésie.

**Mathieu Paquette:** Yes.

**Alexis Deschênes:** As Ms. St-Onge clearly stated, Gaspésie has been calling for this service for a long time. I think your statement today will be very welcome news, even though there may be some lingering doubt.

What reassurance can you give the people of Gaspésie about the steps you are going to take for the resumption of train service to Gaspésie to become a reality?

**Mathieu Paquette:** First, let me say that we understand the concerns of the people of Gaspésie. At VIA Rail, we often say that it was one of the most beautiful routes. The desire to resume service is intact. Some of our employees are back to the drawing board right now. I will be visiting the region soon to meet with various regional stakeholders.

Our goal is to have ongoing dialogue with the coalition, the committee and with the people of Gaspésie to keep everyone up to speed on the progress we are making.

**Alexis Deschênes:** That means people at VIA Rail are looking at various scenarios.

Let us now turn to the rolling stock.

Does VIA Rail currently have rolling stock that would ensure a resumption of partial service?

• (1700)

**Mathieu Paquette:** The answer is yes, but I can't confirm that the service will be similar to what we used to provide.

**Alexis Deschênes:** What options are you exploring for restoring service?

**Mathieu Paquette:** As I said, we are at the drawing board. We're looking at various factors.

We used to have service between Matapédia and Gaspé, and the service was connected to the *Océan* train. I can't tell whether it will be the same type of service, but that is definitely an option. It could

be a daily service between Quebec City and Gaspésie, but as I said, there are several options.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Another option could be a daytime train service departing from Port-Daniel—Gascons or New Carlisle to Quebec City, for example.

Is that in your plans?

**Mathieu Paquette:** Yes, that could be one option. Again, we only own 3% of the tracks we operate on, which means that it all depends on agreements with the owners of the infrastructure that allows us to operate our trains.

**Alexis Deschênes:** You want to look at the state of train stations on your next visit to Gaspésie.

Am I correct?

And may I add that you are more than welcome, Mr. Paquette. Ms. St-Onge and I will be there to receive you and so too will Mr. Éric Dubé from the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie.

**Mathieu Paquette:** We need to do that. As I said, the passenger rail ecosystem is more complex than it would appear.

For us, the safety and well-being of passengers doesn't simply start or end when they board or disembark from the train. We spoke about winter conditions, for example. We can't leave people on a platform during a winter storm or in extreme temperatures.

**Alexis Deschênes:** I understand that you can't give a date, Mr. Paquette, and so I won't ask you for one. However, what time frame are we looking at for the first VIA Rail train to be back on the tracks to Gaspésie?

**Mathieu Paquette:** Again, I can't comment on that, but there is a willingness to get there. We are at the drawing board and we will keep you up to date.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Paquette and Mr. Deschênes.

[*English*]

Next we'll go to Mr. Bélanger.

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

**Jim Bélanger (Sudbury East—Manitoulin—Nickel Belt, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the committee for allowing me to raise some of my concerns here today.

[*Translation*]

Thank you to the witnesses.

[*English*]

I represent many rural and remote communities in northern Ontario that rely on passenger rail to access essential services, including specialized care at Health Sciences North in Sudbury.

Via Rail is a federally owned Crown corporation funded by Canadian taxpayers. Its mandate is to provide reliable passenger rail service to rural and remote communities. Would we agree that the Sudbury-White River line is representative of such communities?

**Mathieu Paquette:** Absolutely. I had the opportunity in my previous life to spend a lot of time in your region. In Sudbury, I was in the mining industry for 15 years.

I want to be clear. Our mandate is to focus on what we can control and to improve our services. We have to make sure that our trains are leaving stations on time, that the fleet reliability is where it should be and that people get to their destinations without incident. When there's an incident or things are not going as planned, our focus should be on passenger care and well-being.

**Jim Bélanger:** I am glad we've established that it's an essential service for us in the north. I'm glad to hear your willingness to improve performance, reliability and customer service.

Now I'm going to talk specifically about line 185-186. It's a great opportunity for you to do that very easily. Customer service and reliability come down to money a lot of the time. How is this line funded?

**Mathieu Paquette:** We receive public funding. Via Rail is an essential service. You touched on it, and it remains for many Canadians the only option when it comes to a transportation mode.

**Jim Bélanger:** We have established that this line from Sudbury to White River is a remote access and that we should fund it.

I have something here that says that the Sudbury to White River train does not receive direct funding from the federal remote passenger rail program. I am asking why that is, because that program just received \$63 million for the next three years. We have a big reliability issue with the Budd cars going from Sudbury to White River.

• (1705)

**Mathieu Paquette:** I would ask my colleague Denis Lavoie to answer this question.

**Denis Lavoie:** I don't know if it's going to answer your specific question, but today Via Rail is going through two major procurement processes to renew the fleet we have across the country outside of the Quebec-Windsor corridor. Sudbury-White River is part of that procurement process.

As we speak, we are renewing what we call the LDRR fleet, long-distance, regional and remote, and there will be brand new trains for that specific segment of Sudbury-White River.

**Jim Bélanger:** Do we know when that is coming?

**Denis Lavoie:** We're in the midst of the procurement processes. We will award the contract in the coming months, and then the design and manufacturing of those trains will start. It will take a couple of years.

**Jim Bélanger:** I fear that the train we have now in Sudbury is not going to last that long. It breaks down often. I believe the train is to run on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from Sudbury to White River, and it comes back to Sudbury the next day. Mondays the train is idle, but last January-February, the train was shut down for almost a month. We call it an essential service, but there is no backup plan. There's no other service available.

Just to compare.... I want to be the voice for the north, and it's very important. It seems there is a two-tier system of service. If we go back to the incident you had in Brockville in December, you

made an apology, you made plans for people to get to their destination and so on. When the White River train is cancelled, this is what people get. I quote—

**The Chair:** Mr. Bélanger, I am going to ask you to ask your question. You're over time, but I want you to ask your question before I provide the floor to another member.

**Jim Bélanger:** Am I out of time?

**The Chair:** Yes, sir, but I am giving you an opportunity to ask a question.

**Jim Bélanger:** Do we have a plan? Okay, forget that.

I used to be in the transportation business. I had to provide a service from point A to point B. If I couldn't provide that service, I had a backup plan. We don't have one in Sudbury. What are we going to do about that?

Are you able to present a plan for Sudbury-White River that will be reliable and consistent?

**Mathieu Paquette:** We will present a plan.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Bélanger.

Thank you very much, Mr. Paquette.

Next, we'll go to Ms. Nguyen

Ms. Nguyen, the floor is yours. You have five minutes, please.

**Chi Nguyen (Spadina—Harbourfront, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Thank you to the witnesses for joining us.

[*English*]

I am a big fan of Via Rail. I used to ride the train between Toronto and Montreal all the time when I had to commute from McGill University. I will say, though, that for many years it has felt like maybe we don't always arrive at the time we were hoping for.

Trains are romantic. They're wonderful. They're part of our very important infrastructure corridor, but we've had some incidents over the last few years that really give Canadians some pause about how we're doing on our rail service.

I would love for you to tell me a little bit about the steps that have been taken over the last few years, especially given all of these challenges, particularly around communications, compensation for passengers and ensuring that we're trying to do our best to manage these situations going forward.

**Mathieu Paquette:** Thank you for your question.

I can assure you that we have learned from each incident that we have had. We have reviewed our internal protocols.

[*Translation*]

I will ask my colleague Marie-Flore Ducrot to give you more details about the steps we have taken.

**Marie-Flore Ducrot (Vice-President, Customer Experience and Network Operations, VIA Rail Canada Inc.):** Over the last few years, we have constantly learned from the various incidents we have experienced, and this culminated in a comprehensive review of our emergency protocols and escalation steps. We have introduced a new mobilization and alert system with more detailed escalation thresholds to ensure incidents are addressed appropriately and in a timely manner.

We have also modernized everything to do with communication with passengers and with frontline employees to ensure they can answer questions effectively. We want to ensure that people have the information they need to make informed decisions.

● (1710)

[English]

**Chi Nguyen:** When incidents happen now, what's the practice or policy around compensation or recognition? Getting another Via Rail credit when you are reluctant to get back on the train may not feel like the right way to have that rectified. I'm curious to see what is now in place for customers who experience deep delays or concerns and challenges.

**Mathieu Paquette:** I'll ask my colleague Marie-Flore to give you more details on those matters.

[Translation]

**Marie-Flore Ducrot:** Our compensation policy for operational disruptions mainly offers credit for future travel with VIA Rail. We hope passengers will give us a second chance and that they will have a more pleasant experience.

That said, with major events, such as the incident in December 2025, we acknowledge that the situation is not acceptable for passengers. In fact, passengers affected by this event received a full refund for their tickets and a full credit for a future trip.

[English]

**Chi Nguyen:** Could you talk a little bit about the process for ensuring that frontline staff are now better trained around how to respond in emergency situations? Where has the work been happening on that front?

[Translation]

**Marie-Flore Ducrot:** We revised the way we communicate completely. We have made sure we make more effective and optimal use of the various communication channels at our disposal. We have also made sure that everyone uses the same communication channels so that everyone gets the same information at the same time and in a timely manner.

[English]

**Chi Nguyen:** I'm done.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Nguyen.

[Translation]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Xavier Barsalou-Duval (Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes—Verchères, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I believe it was agreed we would resume discussion of the motion I moved when I had the floor during our previous meeting.

I will put the motion back on the table. It is worded as follows:

That the Port of Montreal make its remediation plan for the contaminated lands in Contrecoeur available to the public and submit it to the committee, pursuant to Standing Order 108(1)(a), and that the committee invite the port to comply with municipal regulations and Quebec environmental laws.

Since I had the opportunity to table the motion with the committee, we have had roundtable discussions with all sides to see how it could be amended, or at least how it could be made acceptable to the whole committee.

My understanding is that someone on the government side would like to move an amendment that we can all agree on.

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

You have the floor, Mr. Kelloway.

[English]

**Mike Kelloway (Sydney—Glace Bay, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We do have a friendly amendment. I will read the amended motion:

That, on behalf of the committee, the clerk send a letter to the Port of Montreal requesting that it make available to the public and submit to the committee, within 30 days, its remediation plan for contaminated lands in Contrecoeur, and that the committee invite the Port to comply with municipal regulations and Quebec environmental laws.

That would be the amendment we are putting forward.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Kelloway.

[Translation]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, is that agreeable to you?

**Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** It's perfect.

Thank you very much to members on the government side for their co-operation. Hopefully, all upcoming matters will be treated in this way.

[English]

**The Chair:** Colleagues, we've heard the terms of the motion and the amendment proposed by Mr. Kelloway. We'll go to a vote on the amendment first and then the revised motion.

Mr. Albas.

**Dan Albas (Okanagan Lake West—South Kelowna, CPC):** Mr. Chair, usually the amendment would be sent to us. I'd like you to do that first, please.

**The Chair:** Would you like me to suspend, sir? I can. It's not a problem, Mr. Albas.

**Dan Albas:** Can we just vote on this at the end? We still have witnesses here.

● (1715)

**The Chair:** We're discussing it now. We'll dispense with this first.

Mr. Kelloway, can you get that distributed to the clerk so that the clerk can distribute it to members?

I will suspend for a couple of minutes, colleagues, to ensure that we can get that to the clerk and then distributed to members.

The meeting is suspended to the call of the chair.

• (1715) \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• (1720)

**The Chair:** I call this meeting back to order.

Now that the motion and the amendment have been distributed to all members, I believe we can go to a vote.

(Amendment agreed to)

(Motion as amended agreed to)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor now.

[*English*]

Thank you, colleagues.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

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

Let's try to make the best possible use of our time today.

Basically, the testimony we have heard so far has reported what we already knew about the new VIA Rail trains in the Quebec City-Windsor corridor, namely that the trains procured to serve the corridor break down regularly, if not all the time, when it gets a little cold in winter.

The worst thing is that to renew its fleet of 32 trainsets for the Quebec City-Windsor corridor in 2018, the Liberals chose to award the contract to a foreign entity. They decided that the trainsets would be made in California instead of awarding the contract to our community of Saint-Bruno and La Pocatière. That's a loss of \$1 billion for our community. Our fellow citizens could have worked on that project. My assumption is that these trains would have worked in winter had they been made in Canada. In Quebec, winter is at the heart of daily life.

A column by Mr. Julien Arsenault in *Le Devoir* on January 29 stated that VIA Rail does not seem to have learned from its mistakes, and neither has the government, because despite the Liberal Buy Canadian rhetoric and politics, government members are planning to do the exact same thing a second time, meaning they will potentially let this contract go to a company abroad and leave our community penniless in the middle of a tariff war.

With this in mind, I would like to move the following motion:

That the committee request that the Department of Transport ensure that VIA Rail procure its rolling stock from manufacturers established in Canada for the renewal of its fleet, in accordance with the federal Buy Canadian Policy, in order to support the maintenance and development of domestic jobs and industrial capacity.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

I will suspend the meeting while the motion is distributed.

Is the motion in both official languages, Mr. Barsalou-Duval?

**Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** It will be sent in both official languages very shortly.

**The Chair:** Perfect, thank you very much.

[*English*]

The meeting is suspended to the call of the chair.

• (1720) \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• (1730)

**The Chair:** I call this meeting back to order. Thanks for your patience, colleagues. The first thing that we'll do is ensure that we're not taking up the time of our witnesses.

On behalf of all members of the committee, I want to thank you for your time today. Thank you for contributing to this very important study.

If it's okay with the members, I'll ask the witnesses to excuse themselves. Seeing no objection, I'll thank them for being here. We'll deal with some business here before we turn it over to our next panel.

Thank you very much.

**Philip Lawrence:** Thank you very much, witnesses. I'm sorry the last bit of the meeting got derailed.

**Stéphane Lauzon:** Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

You have the floor, Mr. Lauzon.

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

We agree with the intent of the motion because the federal procurement policy is very important to us too. However, it would seem that saying "procure" means there is an obligation to procure.

I would therefore like to move an amendment. After "VIA Rail", instead of writing "procure its rolling stock from manufacturers established in Canada for [...]", we can simply write "applies the federal Buy Canadian Policy in the context of [...]"

The last part of the motion remains the same, that is "in order to support the maintenance and development of domestic jobs and industrial capacity".

• (1735)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Lauzon.

You have the floor, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

**Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** I think we should also mention the context of fleet renewal, because Mr. Lauzon's current proposal doesn't include that.

I understand that he is proposing the following wording: "That the committee request that the Department of Transport ensure that VIA Rail applies the federal Buy Canadian Policy in the context of the renewal of its long-distance fleet, in order to support the maintenance and development of domestic jobs and industrial capacity".

I added the clarification on the context.

**Stéphane Lauzon:** Mr. Chair, we can use Mr. Barsalou-Duval's wording for our record because he can't amend his own motion. I will therefore quote his wording. I hope the clerk has noted down Mr. Barsalou-Duval's addition, because I agree with that.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Lauzon.

I will make sure the clerk wrote down everything clearly.

Could you repeat your statement, Mr. Barsalou-Duval?

**Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** I will repeat the amendment moved by Mr. Lauzon.

That the committee request that the Department of Transport ensure that VIA Rail applies the federal Buy Canadian Policy in the context of the renewal of its long-distance fleet, in order to support the maintenance and development of domestic jobs and industrial capacity.

**Stéphane Lauzon:** I agree with that, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Lauzon.

[English]

Go ahead, Mr. Albas.

[Translation]

**Dan Albas:** The Conservative Party is supporting this minor change and wishes to congratulate Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Albas.

[English]

Colleagues, we have an amendment proposed by Mr. Lauzon. We'll vote on that first. It looks like we do have consent for this.

(Amendment agreed to)

(Motion as amended agreed to)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, colleagues. I'm going to suspend now to allow the clerk to transfer over to our second round of witnesses for today.

The meeting is suspended to the call of the chair.

• (1735) \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• (1745)

**The Chair:** I call this meeting back to order.

Colleagues, before we begin the questioning of our second round of witnesses for today, I believe we have some housekeeping we need to take care of.

The first item would be the adoption of the budget for the port study, which has been distributed to members.

All those in favour of adopting the budget?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** Next, I believe we have a motion that was proposed by Mr. Lawrence.

I'll turn the floor over to you, sir.

**Philip Lawrence:** I believe we have an agreement on the motion with an amendment coming from the Liberals. I'll read the motion really quickly, and then they can read their amendment. We'll vote and we'll get this done. I move:

That the Minister of Transport, along with officials from the Department, be invited to appear on the Supplementary Estimates (C), 2025-26, for two hours; and that this meeting take place at least five calendar days before the Supplementary Estimates are to be reported to the House.

It's over to you, Mike.

**Mike Kelloway:** Thanks very much.

Our friendly amendment would be that after "that this meeting take place", we would add "within a reasonable time frame", and we would strike "at least five calendar days before the Supplementary Estimates are to be reported to the House".

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Kelloway.

Go ahead, Mr. Albas.

**Dan Albas:** I just wanted to indicate that we really want to see the minister. We really do hope that he takes the opportunity to be accountable.

**The Chair:** That is so noted. Thank you very much, Mr. Albas.

Are there any other questions or comments?

(Amendment agreed to)

(Motion as amended agreed to)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, colleagues.

Colleagues, I now have the pleasure of introducing our next round of witnesses, beginning with our representative from the Cruise Lines International Association, Mr. Barry Penner, adviser. We have, from the Saint John Port Authority, Mr. Craig Bell Estabrooks, chief executive officer, joining us by video conference. We also have, from Corner Brook Port Corporation, Ms. Kelly Smith, chief executive officer.

Welcome. We'll begin with opening remarks.

I'll turn it over to you, Ms. Smith. You have five minutes.

**Kelly Smith (Chief Executive Officer, Corner Brook Port Corporation):** Thank you for the opportunity to appear here today.

I would like to begin by acknowledging that the port of Corner Brook operates on the traditional territory of the Beothuk, and that the island of Newfoundland is the ancestral homeland of the Mi'kmaq.

The port of Corner Brook is a not-for-profit community-based port serving western Newfoundland and Labrador. We are not a Canada port authority. When the federal government divested our port in 2004, we became fully responsible for operating and maintaining federally built infrastructure without the borrowing capacity or revenue streams available to CPAs.

Across Canada, independent ports like ours play a critical role in regional and national supply chain resilience. In Atlantic Canada alone, we handle roughly 40% of all domestic and international marine trade. Our ports move the people and goods that fuel the Canadian economy—critical minerals, forest products, seafood and energy—while sustaining rural and coastal communities.

In western Newfoundland, emerging opportunities in critical minerals, including inputs for clean energy technologies, highlight the importance of reliable marine infrastructure to move equipment, supplies and future critical mineral products to market.

The port of Corner Brook already contributes to Canada's trade network through our international container service and global exports, in partnership with Kruger-owned Corner Brook Pulp and Paper. With upgraded infrastructure, we can further diversify and continue to strengthen Canada's global competitiveness.

Independent ports also play a critical role in national security and Arctic operations. We provide staging points for the Canadian Coast Guard and the Royal Canadian Navy, supporting vessel patrols, resupply missions and emergency response. Our ports underpin regional resilience, ensuring essential goods reach communities during extreme weather or supply disruptions and supporting food security.

Like many ports across the country, however, we are managing aging core infrastructure well beyond its intended useful life. To illustrate the scale of this challenge for independent ports, we recently issued an RFP for repairs to just 65 piles. The final cost for those repairs was \$5.2 million. Our port has approximately 1,500 piles, the majority of which will require repair or replacement within the next decade.

For a not-for-profit port without CPA-level borrowing authority or the revenue levers, the costs are not recoverable, yet the infrastructure is essential to the industries and communities we serve. Deterioration is accelerating, and without timely intervention, the costs will only continue to increase.

To address this, we have undertaken assessments for a potential expansion and modernization initiative, a once-in-a-generation opportunity to secure safe and reliable marine infrastructure for western Newfoundland and, by extension, Canada's supply chains. The project includes rehabilitating aging assets, adding a new berth and lay-down capacity, and improving climate resilience. This will increase our ability to support additional container traffic, renewable energy projects and critical mineral supply chains. Initial estimates exceed well beyond \$100 million, however, for an investment that would deliver benefits far beyond our region.

Many existing federal programs, whether due to cost-share expectations or repayable loan structures, implicitly assume CPA-level resources. This unintentionally limits the ability of independent ports to access the very programs intended to support national supply chains. We believe a federal partnership tailored to the realities of independent ports is essential to address long-standing infrastructure deficits, ensure regional supply chain reliability and food security, support rural and coastal economic development, and strengthen Canada's national transportation network.

The port of Corner Brook is ready to modernize, ready to grow and ready to support Canada's evolving trade and security needs, but to unlock that potential, independent ports require federal partnerships that reflect the realities of divested infrastructure. With the right partnerships, ports like ours can strengthen supply chains, support emerging industries and provide the capacity Canada will need in the decades ahead.

We respectfully ask that the Government of Canada develop dedicated funding and policy tools that recognize the unique capacities and limitations of divested community-based ports.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear. I will be pleased to take your questions.

● (1750)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Smith, for your opening remarks.

Next, we'll have Mr. Penner.

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

**Barry Penner (Advisor, Cruise Lines International Association):** Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

My name is Barry Penner, and I'm appearing today on behalf of Cruise Lines International Association, which is also known by its acronym CLIA.

CLIA is the world's largest cruise industry association, representing ocean, river and specialty cruise lines, as well as travel advisers, suppliers, ports and maritime partners across Canada and across the world.

Cruising is an important contributor to Canada's economy. In 2024 alone, 3.7 million cruise guests entered Canada through ports in British Columbia, Quebec and Atlantic Canada. The sector generated approximately \$5.1 billion in economic activity right across the country, contributing \$2.7 billion to Canada's GDP, supporting more than 24,000 Canadian jobs and generating \$1.4 billion in wages and salaries. This represents real economic activity flowing into Canadian communities, from longshore workers and shipyards to tourism operators and local businesses.

Our recommendations today focus on ensuring that Canada's cruise sector remains competitive, modern and positioned for sustainable growth.

First, let's modernize and expand port infrastructure. Canada has more than a dozen cruise ports that deliver significant economic opportunity. However, as you heard just moments ago, some infrastructure is aging and several facilities cannot accommodate newer and larger vessels. At the same time, permitting processes and capital approval processes are delaying necessary upgrades. Cruise ships are becoming more technologically advanced and environmentally efficient. Port infrastructure needs to evolve accordingly.

CLIA recommends enhanced federal support for cruise-compatible port infrastructure, streamlined permitting timelines and targeted investment programs that recognize cruise tourism as an important driver of regional economic development. This is not about expansion for its own sake. It's about ensuring that Canadian ports remain internationally competitive with U.S. and European ports that are actively modernizing.

Second, we support marine alternative fuel development. The cruise industry is committed to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050. Cruise lines are investing billions of dollars in fuel-flexible engines and emissions-reduction technologies. However, ships can only transition to new fuels where alternative fuels are available at scale and at a commercially viable cost.

Canada has an opportunity to become a leader in the production and supply of low-carbon marine fuels. Federal policies that support production capacity and encourage marine fuel infrastructure while aligning regulatory frameworks with international standards will help make this transition possible.

Third, let's continue to expand shore power infrastructure. Shore power, which allows ships to plug into land-based electricity while they're in port, is one of the most effective ways to reduce emissions at berth. By 2028, roughly 80% of the global cruise fleet will be equipped to connect to shore power, and virtually all new ships on order now will have that capability. Canadian ports such as Vancouver, Halifax and Montreal already have shore power facilities, and I know that others are exploring installation. Continued federal investment can help expand shore power availability as part of Canada's green corridor initiatives.

Fourth, let's enhance maritime competitiveness. Cruise volume in Canada rose by about 7% in 2024, and this year is expected to be another growth year. However, maintaining that growth requires an efficient and competitive operating environment. We support expanding the Canada Border Services Agency's virtual clearance pilot, which took place on the east coast, and making regulatory changes that allow broader adoption across Canada.

Ship maintenance and refits represent a growing economic opportunity. In 2024 alone, cruise lines spent about \$93 million on Canadian ship-related expenses, but high fees and long processing times in allowing experts from other countries, who are required for sensitive work on technologically advanced systems due in part to warranty requirements, can create barriers to bringing more of that valuable refit work and the jobs that come with it here to Canada. Further streamlining visa and entry processes for crew members and technical specialists will help support jobs for Canadians.

In closing, Canada has a strong cruise sector with growing demand and a highly capable workforce. With strategic infrastructure

investment, support for alternative fuels, expanded shore power and regulatory modernization, Canada can strengthen port competitiveness and support thousands of Canadian jobs while advancing environmental leadership and securing long-term economic growth for our coastal communities.

• (1755)

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would welcome the committee's questions and be pleased to expand on any of these recommendations.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Penner.

Finally, we turn it over to you, Mr. Estabrooks. Thank you for staying late today. I know it's 7 p.m. out there in Saint John.

I'll turn the floor over to you for your five-minute opening remarks, sir.

**Craig Bell Estabrooks (Chief Executive Officer, Saint John Port Authority):** It's my pleasure to be here no matter what time of day.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee for the opportunity to meet with you today.

[*English*]

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today on behalf of our growing global gateway, which serves as an increasing critical conduit for Canada's trade.

I would also like to recognize, Mr. Chair, your visit to the port of Saint John last summer, which we greatly appreciated. It provided an opportunity for you to see first-hand the role our port plays in strengthening Canada's trade and our national supply chain.

Port Saint John manages 330 acres of land and adjacent waterways on behalf of the Government of Canada as a Canadian port authority. Handling over 1,000 vessels annually, we support a diverse cargo base, from more than one million tonnes of Saskatchewan potash exports to 24 million tonnes of liquid bulk—imported crude oil, exported refined petroleum and liquefied natural gas—alongside a wide range of other break-bulk and bulk commodities.

We also play an important role in southern New Brunswick's tourism ecosystem, welcoming between 150,000 and 200,000 cruise passengers via the Bay of Fundy each year. As a key economic driver for New Brunswick, the port contributes an estimated \$1.3 billion to provincial GDP and supports more than 6,000 jobs.

Perhaps the most exciting story, and the one increasingly putting us on the global stage, is our container sector. Having recently completed a nation-building project of our own, we understand well the benefits of public investment in Canada's supply chain. With support from such programs as the build Canada fund and the original trade diversification fund and in partnership with the Government of Brunswick, we completed the transformational \$247-million modernization of our west side container terminal at the end of 2025. This project has quadrupled our container capacity, significantly increased our vessel handling capabilities and attracted world-class partners committed to the long term.

Today, the port of Saint John is one of North America's fastest-growing ports. Container volumes increased 29% between 2024 and 2025, doubling over the past five years and growing by 315% over the past decade. This growth has been driven in large part by the nearly \$1 billion in private sector investments in infrastructure and equipment across our growing gateway. Investments from terminal operators, rail lines and shipping lines were catalyzed by the initial public funding in our container terminal infrastructure. Sometimes when you build it, they really do come.

Momentum continues to build. Later this year, we will open the first Canadian import-export hub by Americold, a global leader in cold storage for temperature-controlled goods. This facility will expand value-added services for shippers and support the development of the broader agri-food strategy at the port of Saint John.

To ensure that we can reach our full potential and support the federal government's trade diversification agenda, we can't let our foot off the gas. That's why we are aggressively investing in our infrastructure to the tune of \$35 million through our annual capital program over the next five years. This is not to create anew; rather, it's to replace and restore aging infrastructure. In alignment with many other ports across this country, our infrastructure deficit remains a major issue.

To strengthen the gateway and bolster Canada's supply chain resilience, we must invest strategically to address these infrastructure deficits while also looking beyond our piers and channels. A holistic approach is required to ensure fluidity across the entire supply chain. This includes targeted investments in rail, road and inland infrastructure so that Canadian goods can move seamlessly to and from global markets on each coast. We welcome the federal government's new trade diversification corridors fund, which reflects this system-wide approach.

From a governance and regulatory standpoint, the federal government should maximize our financial flexibility to support those system-wide investments by revisiting the borrowing limit process under the Canada Marine Act. Simplifying and streamlining this process would enable us to strategically invest in our gateway without cash flow constraints.

I echo the comments of my port counterparts. From coast to coast to coast, our ports play a critical role in securing Canada's economic sovereignty. Our growing gateway is uniquely positioned to support the federal government's trade diversification goals. I appreciate the opportunity to share that message with you here today.

Thanks for having me. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

• (1800)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Estabrooks.

We'll begin our line of questioning with Ms. Anstey.

The floor is yours. You have six minutes, please.

**Carol Anstey (Long Range Mountains, CPC):** Thank you, Kelly, for the great work that you do at the Corner Brook port.

Thank you to all the witnesses. It's a pleasure to have you here with us today.

Kelly, in your opening remarks, you talked about some of the challenges that smaller ports have. I want to dig into that a little bit. I think it's important for the work of the committee.

You often operate with fewer resources and fewer staff than large port authorities. When you're applying for these complex federal programs, does that application process create another barrier for you? Can you expand on that a little bit, please?

**Kelly Smith:** Yes, it does. We operate with three people who would be working on an application for this type of funding. The application package tends to be the same for us when we're looking for \$50 million as it would be for somebody looking for billions of dollars. The process to do that takes a lot of time and knowledge. We have, as I said, three people who would be working on it on our part.

The CPAs have much more staff, obviously, but they also tend to use outside consultants to prepare those documents and that application package, which would be expensive. It's not something that we can necessarily do without funding, even to do those application packages externally. That's a big drawback for us. We just don't have the staff internally to do that.

**Carol Anstey:** Thank you for that.

Something else is that the government has been talking a lot about Bill C-5 and large nation-building projects. We saw on that list, certainly, investment into the Montreal port. I'm curious what your thoughts are in being overlooked in that process, when you play such a critical role.

Is this a concern that you have as a smaller port, that you won't get in on this part of the government strategy?

**Kelly Smith:** One hundred per cent. While the mandate of Bill C-5 is great, our project that we're looking at, which I spoke of, hits on all of the key targets within that, within the national trade diversification corridors fund. Our project would fit there perfectly. The issue comes in the way it's structured.

As I said, the cost-sharing aspect can be limiting for small ports. For example, as I said, we really would like to do this expansion plan and the rehabilitation of our existing berth. We need that, but if the cost is \$100 million or up to \$200 million, we just don't have the capacity to take on the borrowing for that. We don't have the revenue streams. It pretty well eliminates us, so that's the struggle. The expense of doing these is so high, but the small, independent ports really don't have the revenue stream, as I said, or the ability to borrow \$50 million to see this through.

• (1805)

**Carol Anstey:** To reflect on that a little bit more, you talked about some emerging opportunities such as critical minerals. Without the modernization of the port infrastructure, which is your biggest issue right now, is there a risk that you'll miss out on those opportunities? Can you just expand on that a little bit?

**Kelly Smith:** We definitely would miss out. I mean, if we can't....

In western Newfoundland right now, there are quite a few projects on the go that focus on critical minerals. We want to be ready for when they're ready to export. If they have to take their product outside of western Newfoundland, their costs are going to go up, and that's going to impact their project. From our standpoint, we need the second berth to enable us to be ready for when they're ready.

Without that second berth or even work on our existing infrastructure...because we're struggling with our existing infrastructure right now. There are areas we can't use. If we have to work with that, we won't be ready for when they're ready, and we will lose out on those opportunities.

**Carol Anstey:** Thank you for that.

With respect to the importance of the Corner Brook port, you mentioned supporting Coast Guard and naval operations, including missions into the eastern Arctic. Could you expand on that a little bit? I think that is also a very important piece in terms of the role that you play in our area.

**Kelly Smith:** Yes, and it's not just our port. A lot of small, independent ports work closely with the Canadian Coast Guard in particular. In the winter months, the port of Corner Brook is a very regular stop for the Canadian Coast Guard. They're there now, actually. We have two icebreakers there, because they service the Newfoundland ferry to Labrador. They frequent our port. As I said, there are two there this week. They're there from December to May.

They come in to obtain fuel and replenish their supplies. They also do crew changes there.

We are a critical spot for them. There's nowhere else in western Newfoundland they can access during those months, because we have full, year-round service. We also have a deepwater port, so they can access our port during those periods. It's crucial that we be open for those purposes.

**Carol Anstey:** Quickly, because I think I'm running out of time, if the port doesn't get the necessary resources you need to address these infrastructure issues that you have, what does that mean in terms of the long-term economic viability of your operation?

**Kelly Smith:** I touched a little bit on Corner Brook Pulp and Paper, for example. They are a huge exporter through our port, and they export all over the world. They're also looking at diversifying and exporting other products.

One of the things we're looking at is wind energy. If we can't upgrade our facility and refurbish it, we will ultimately not be able to have a service in the long run. I'm not talking 10 to 15 years. I'm talking five to 10 years. As I said earlier, we're already at a point where some of our existing dock has been cordoned off because—

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Kelly Smith:** —it doesn't have integrity anymore, and we can't utilize it. We're at a critical point where we have to make decisions. Do we spend \$5 million annually to upgrade—

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. I'm sorry, Ms. Smith. Time is up. I appreciate your sharing that.

We'll turn it over to Mr. Greaves, who is joining us online.

Mr. Greaves, the floor is yours. You have six minutes, please.

**Will Greaves (Victoria, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, colleagues. It's a pleasure to join you, as always.

Thank you to the witnesses for being with us today as well. My question to begin with is for Mr. Penner.

Good afternoon, Mr. Penner. As I'm sure you're aware, my riding of Victoria is home to the busiest cruise ship port in Canada. We welcomed just under one million visitors in 2025, and we're always keen to do so. We recognize the value that the cruise industry brings to our region. At the same time, there are always people in our community who are looking to see how we can improve the experience for tourists, for residents and of course for our local marine ecosystem.

This is a vital part of what makes our community special, so I wonder if you could elaborate on your comments in terms of steps that the industry is taking or perhaps plans to take in the future to help reduce its environmental impact on the port communities that you visit or pass through.

• (1810)

**Barry Penner:** Thank you. It's a pleasure to meet you virtually. I look forward to meeting you in person when time permits.

As I mentioned in my remarks, the cruise line industry has been investing billions of dollars, literally, in advanced technologies, which then later are adopted by the rest of the shipping industry. Cruise tends to dominate public attention, but it represents less than 1% of ocean-going vessels. It's really where the research and innovation take place. We are at the leading edge in making advances in technology, and then they are adopted in other sectors in the maritime industry.

Over the years, we've greatly reduced the amount of waste that's generated on board. The recycling programs are second to none. There are occasionally challenges due to made-in-Canada regulations that we have to deal with, which sometimes limit the amount of recycling we're able to do, and trying to make sure that other objectives don't get in the way of enhanced recycling targets is an ongoing work in progress. Our member lines are very proud of their record in terms of the percentage that's recycled and the waste that's avoided.

Virtually all of our ships, especially on the west coast, have what's known as advanced waste-water treatment systems, which are far superior to many municipal waste-water treatment plants.

I was the minister of environment when British Columbia required Victoria to start treating its sewage. It always struck me as a bit ironic that the cruise ships were performing to a much higher standard than our provincial capital wanted at the time. There was some opposition to my order that they had to start treating the sewage, but we've overcome that, and now Victoria does have advanced waste-water treatment on about par with what's happening on the cruise ships. I can't say the same for the city of Vancouver, where there's still primary sewage treatment.

The environmental performance that you see on board cruise ships exceeds, as I mentioned, many of the waste-water treatment systems operated by municipalities in various parts of Canada.

Along the way, we've made other efforts in terms of energy reduction so that less energy is required to operate the ships on a per-passenger basis, and we're constantly looking for innovations, whether it's LED lighting or more efficient heating and cooling systems on board the ships.

Now, working through the International Maritime Organization with the 2050 zero-emissions target, we're seeing changes in operations of the cruise ships, including slowdowns. Operating at lower speeds overall tends to reduce the amount of fuel consumed over the length of a cruise, whether it's four days or seven days. One of the unintended consequences of that, though, is that the cruise ships sometimes have less time that they can spend in port. If they're moving more slowly between ports, they can't spend as much time

in the ports. That's been noticeable in Victoria, and that message has been heard.

**Will Greaves:** Thank you for those remarks and for reminding us how far we've come in terms of our own relationship with our local environment.

Could you elaborate on the point you just raised about recycling, please? What are the barriers there for some of those recycling measures to be adopted, if I understood you, while the vessels are in Canadian waters?

**Barry Penner:** Obviously, it's due to other competing public priorities around identifying items on the ships that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency might have a concern about—whether they're properly inspected or not, or having at least proof of that. If the CB-SA inspectors aren't satisfied that all the food items, for example parmesan cheese, have been stamped with an appropriate mark, then items on board the ship can be considered high risk.

This is a real example of what happened last year and the year before. By the end of the season, we were able to get around that, but the consequence of when items on board the ship are deemed high risk from a public health perspective, because the appropriate stamp on the cheese is not identified, for example, then the recycling process doesn't work the same way. The waste has to be taken off, and it can't go to recycling. The cruise lines would much prefer that wine bottles, pop bottles, cardboard and so on get recycled rather than not.

That's an ongoing issue that we're working with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency on, as well as Transport Canada.

• (1815)

**Will Greaves:** It's noted. Thank you.

I'm shifting gears slightly. In terms of the economic impact of the cruise industry for Canadian ports, we have certain kinds of data related to direct employment and sometimes the direct economic benefits of cruise passengers, for example, when they dock in a particular community.

Does your organization have more robust data about the indirect economic impact of cruises on different Canadian port cities, and would that data be publicly available?

**The Chair:** Would you give a 15-second response, please, sir?

**Barry Penner:** Yes. We do an economic impact assessment almost every year, I think. Maybe it's every two years. I'd have to double-check. We're working, I think, on finalizing the most recent results, and they are made public. It's available through our website and occasionally gets accompanied by a news release.

**Will Greaves:** I appreciate it.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Greaves.

Thank you, Mr. Penner.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** Good evening.

Welcome to the witnesses. It's always a pleasure to have guests.

Mr. Penner, I am from Quebec. Obviously, Quebec has a lot of extremely popular cruise destinations, including Quebec City, the North Shore, Gaspésie, the Magdalen Islands and Montreal. We are blessed in that area.

With that in mind, as far as you know, which areas in Quebec have not been fully tapped, which areas have the strongest potential for growth, and which areas have the greatest investment needs?

Are they the same areas or are they different?

[*English*]

**Barry Penner:** Thank you.

I know there has been significant interest in the port of Montreal. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, there's now shore power available there for ships to plug in and turn off their engines while they're at port. I hear from our members that there's a strong interest in Quebec City. It's a destination that the passengers like to get to. One of the challenges can be arranging transportation from the port of Montreal to Quebec City. An adequate number of buses can be sometimes hard to secure to bring passengers there.

I believe there are some discussions taking place about possibly arranging railcars as an alternative, using the railway system. I believe in your previous session you had someone from Via Rail present. That might be something that could happen in the future, but I'm not in a position to say. There are other options that I know the industry is looking at, with their partners, to try to move passengers to the sites they want to see and therefore reduce some of the traffic on the roads. One option might be rail.

[*Translation*]

**Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** You mentioned the importance of shore power in supporting climate change objectives.

Is shore power for these facilities an asset?

Does this attract more cruise ships?

Are there sites that don't have shore power now, but installation would make a difference?

[*English*]

**Barry Penner:** It certainly is something that I think the cruise lines look at. Of course, price is also a question, but in Canada, we do tend to have very competitive electricity rates. It's not the same in all parts of the world.

Just looking more globally, as I mentioned, while about 80% of the ocean-going cruise ships now are capable of plugging in, only about 3% of the ports in the world can do that, can actually receive the plug and provide the shore power. In Canada, we currently have I believe three ports. I know that others are looking at it actively.

It does come down to a business case. Some ports, if they're not port authorities, don't have the same borrowing capability in order to invest in that shoreside infrastructure. That could be one of the limitations of making this available, but certainly, when it is available at a competitive price, our members are interested in plugging in.

[*Translation*]

**Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** My final question is on the availability of customs services. I have to say that this topic comes up repeatedly in testimony from representatives of organizations and ports that appear before us. It would seem that this is a systemic problem.

Do you know why customs services are no longer offered?

Is this a courtesy service or is it based on a user fee?

If it's based on a user fee and it operates on the user-pay principle, I don't see why the government would limit opportunities for growth when it comes to customs services.

• (1820)

[*English*]

**Barry Penner:** I believe there is a cost-recovery process involved, but my understanding is that when COVID struck, it disrupted a lot of things. Once cruises resumed after the interruption—it was two years in Canada that cruising was halted—the CBSA services were not restored to all of the smaller ports where previously they had been available. This definitely does negatively impact the ability of our member lines to call on those ports.

In my remarks, I mentioned, let's maybe take a look at expanding the pilot program for virtual clearance that was offered. There might be a way, by using newer technology and newer approaches, that we can expand on that and provide an equivalent amount of security for Canada with these cruise passengers coming aboard. We could deliver the service, but perhaps at a reduced cost, and if staffing is a limitation, then this would be one way to help improve that.

I can speak from personal experience with my family when we called in Victoria. We were all detained on the ship and waiting for clearance to take place: literally for officers to come on board, check paperwork and do various things. Even though my family wasn't being interviewed, we had to wait like everyone else. That then deprives not just the passengers of an experience, but the community of the benefit of having thousands of passengers going ashore and spending money in the community because they're held back for a period of time.

Anything we can do to expedite that process would benefit the cruise experience, but especially it would benefit the communities because, to be a bit crass, there would be more time for passengers to spend money in your communities.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

Thank you, Mr. Penner.

Next, we'll go to Mr. Albas.

The floor is yours for five minutes, sir.

**Dan Albas:** Thank you, Chair.

Welcome to my fellow British Columbian, Mr. Penner. I appreciate your being here.

In regard to the cutbacks about particular CBSA allocations, can you give the committee, in writing, a sample of those particular ports where that's an issue, as well as any other suggestions you would have about shortening up? I do like the idea of allowing Canadians who don't need to be checked by CBSA, for example, to do that more expediently. Is that a possibility?

**Barry Penner:** Yes, I can get more information—for sure.

**Dan Albas:** That's a big thing.

I want to talk to you a bit about the issue you mentioned with contractual services. I think you said that it was usually around warranty work. We do have excellent infrastructure in British Columbia—I'm sure other provinces have the same—where we could do more of this work, but it's difficult.

Under CETA, the comprehensive economic treaty agreement with Europe, there's supposed to be a contractual service supplier. It's a T47 that IRCC is supposed to give. It usually takes about two to eight weeks. Then CBSA reviews that. Does your industry know about this particular T47 process that speeds things up so that people can come in and do this kind of contractual work?

**Barry Penner:** I can't say with certainty. I would hope so.

Individual cruise lines are responsible, of course, for arranging for the refits, working with their service provider. In the case of British Columbia, it's Seaspan. They mostly use the facilities around Esquimalt, near Victoria, but also in Vancouver.

**Dan Albas:** Do you think that this committee should recommend to the government that there needs to be more industry consultation about these mechanisms, specifically the T43 for independent professionals and the T47, as I said, for contractual service suppliers? There are already mandated criteria for that. It really disturbs me that we're turning away business because it can't be done in a timely way.

**Barry Penner:** It never hurts to have another look at it. I'm sure there's always room for improvement. I can't say exactly which cruise lines are using which mechanisms, but it's always worth taking a look at whether there are ways we can make our processes more efficient.

**Dan Albas:** If someone has a contract and is an EU resident, they should be able to show up at a port of entry. I'm sure people in your industry would benefit from that. I appreciate that.

Lastly, on modernizing and expanding port infrastructure, you said in your opening statement that there are more than a dozen sites that could be improved. Could you supply the committee with those sites, just so that we can have it for part of our current report?

**Barry Penner:** I believe so, yes.

**Dan Albas:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Penner.

I've already done a notice of motion, Mr. Chair, for this. I move:

That, notwithstanding the scheduling motion adopted by the committee during its 16th meeting, and in light of recent media reports regarding a \$206 million taxpayer funded loan from the Canada Infrastructure Bank to the Mersey River wind project, and allegations that the project's electricity selling entity, Roswall Development, is largely owned by individuals with close family or business ties to former Liberal Members of Parliament Scott Brison, Darrell Samson, and David Dingwall, the committee undertake a study examining the decision-making process, due diligence practices, governance safeguards, and conflict of interest policies of the Canada Infrastructure Bank as they relate to this loan;

a. That the study consist of no fewer than two meetings;

b. That the study be given absolute priority over other matters before the committee;

c. That the committee invite the Minister of Housing and Infrastructure, the CEO and other officials from the Canada Infrastructure Bank, and representatives of Roswall Development including Michel Samson, Edgar Samson, Mitchell Brison, Dan Roscoe, David Howell, and Scott Rodgers to testify before the committee in relation to the study—

• (1825)

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

I just received a message from the interpreters that they don't have the writing for that—

**Dan Albas:** Yes, it's been given.

**Stéphane Lauzon:** —and he's reading too fast, so they can't follow in French.

**Dan Albas:** Mr. Chair, I'm just trying to get through in my time. We have supplied this to the clerk.

**The Chair:** If they can't translate, I'm not allowed to move forward.

**Dan Albas:** I can slow down, but I just need to know that I can finish doing this.

**The Chair:** I'm just going to ask a question of our interpreters. If he slows down, will that be helpful?

**Philip Lawrence:** Don't they have a copy of this?

**Dan Albas:** Yes, they should have a copy.

**The Chair:** We're going to send a copy to them, Mr. Albas. I'll let you continue, sir, but, really, I just can't proceed unless we have translation.

**Dan Albas:** Yes, that's fair.

It goes on:

d. That one meeting be dedicated to hearing the testimony of the Minister of Housing and Infrastructure and the CEO and other officials from the Canada Infrastructure Bank; and—

**The Chair:** Mr. Albas, I am going to have to cut you off. We have zero translation right now.

The clerk is working as diligently as possible to ensure that they have a copy of it. Once they have a copy of it, Mr. Albas, I will turn the floor back over to you to continue.

Thanks for your patience, colleagues.

**Dan Albas:** Thank you. It goes on:

e. That the subsequent meeting be dedicated to hearing the testimony of representatives of Roswall Development including Michel Samson, Edgar Samson, Mitchell Brison, Dan Roscoe, David Howell, and Scott Rodgers.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Albas. I appreciate your patience with that.

**Dan Albas:** Would you like me to say it again?

**Stéphane Lauzon:** Do it faster, please.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** All jokes aside, I just want to make sure that we're okay. Yes.

Are there questions or comments, colleagues?

**Dan Albas:** I'm happy to speak to the motion.

**The Chair:** If you'd like to speak to it, go right ahead.

**Dan Albas:** Thank you.

This is a news story that has raised a lot of concerns. The Conservatives believe that by studying this in a timely fashion, bringing forward and asking these questions.... We've seen before that the CIB seems to have its own criteria, and I think we need to investigate it. We've seen before, in previous decisions, that "made in Canada" was not part of its regime.

We think that, in this case, for the public trust—meaning people feel these public entities, whether they are Crown corporations or government agencies, should abide by certain rules around conflict of interest—if we have the various groups come in, including the minister's office and the CIB, as well as inviting the company itself, we can publicly address this, and we think this is the proper forum for such a discussion.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Albas.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

**Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** I think this is a matter of public interest. Much too often in the past we have seen cronyism on the Liberal side. We don't know if that's the case this time, but the situation is definitely suspicious.

I think we have a duty to analyze things and to call witnesses to answer the questions my colleague has raised. I'll wait and see if there are more comments before I turn to some other aspects, but I agree with the principle.

The only point I would like to raise is point (b), which proposes that the "study be given absolute priority over all other matters before the committee". I don't know if the clerk has already invited any witnesses to the meetings. I think meetings have already been scheduled.

I would therefore like to amend point (b) to let the witnesses who have already been invited testify. That way, we won't have to start over all over again. Otherwise, I completely agree with that.

• (1830)

**The Chair:** You have the floor, Mr. Lauzon.

**Stéphane Lauzon:** Indeed, point (b) does not fit.

I would like point (b) to be changed to "the study be given absolute priority over other matters before the committee". That's how we want point (b) to be drafted. It fits in with what Mr. Barsalou-Duval stated. The rest is fine.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Lauzon.

[*English*]

Mr. Albas, go ahead.

**Dan Albas:** Thank you.

I certainly can appreciate Mr. Barsalou-Duval's comments on where he would like to see...because the clerk has been working very hard, and I will praise the clerk publicly here for trying to keep so many balls in the air.

Perhaps I can make a suggestion to Mr. Barsalou-Duval that witnesses who have been confirmed at the point of the adoption of this motion be kept and that the priority is given directly after. I'm worried that if we say "invited", some people may not have responded, and that could create some confusion in the clerk's mind.

If there's been a commitment made to have witnesses come on a particular date, then this particular motion would not apply to that, and the clerk would simply slip them in as quickly as possible so the substance of the motion happens as quickly as possible. If the member were to make that motion, I would absolutely accept it as a friendly amendment.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Albas.

[*Translation*]

I would like to say something before I turn the floor over to Mr. Barsalou-Duval. There was some uncertainty around your proposal, Mr. Lauzon. You said something, but on both sides we were wondering what the proposed amendment was.

**Stéphane Lauzon:** Thank you for the opportunity to clarify my proposal.

I didn't have the text before me, and so I would like to move a subamendment because Mr. Barsalou-Duval has already moved an amendment.

I move as follows: "That the study begin following the conclusion of the ongoing study of supporting, diversifying, and modernizing Quebec and Canada's ports".

I'm not opposed to moving forward, but it's just that we want to prioritize the ongoing study.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Lauzon.

You have the floor, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

**Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** I was going to move an amendment to what Mr. Albas has moved.

At the end of point (b), I would add: "with the exception of meetings for which witnesses have already confirmed their presence". It would be different from what Mr. Lauzon has moved. I don't know how Mr. Lauzon wants to proceed. If my amendment is acceptable to him, he may be willing to withdraw his friendly amendment and we will retain mine.

He may want to keep the subamendment as currently moved. I think the proposed subamendment takes us very far into the future. I think this is an important issue. We're only talking about two meetings. I have a feeling that this topic needs to be dealt with quickly. We can't deal with it in May.

**The Chair:** I just want to confirm what has been proposed for the benefit of everyone. If we finish the study on ports, that will bring us to April 13. We would therefore start the proposed study on Wednesday, April 15.

You have the floor, Mr. Lauzon.

**Stéphane Lauzon:** You took the words right out of my mouth, Mr. Chair.

We have already done the math concerning the end date of the current study even though we don't know the number of witnesses that will be available over the next weeks. We are going to be in our respective ridings next week, but we have the date when we will look at this matter, and it will not be in June. It will be April 15.

We could even put consideration of this motion on the agenda of the two meetings that have been scheduled, including the meeting on April 15. That would work for me and it would not delay our ongoing business. We know that the current study will end on April 13 and that we will be available on April 15. I don't mind adding a date, instead of working with the number of witnesses that will be available from those on the list.

I don't want to speak for the clerk, but convening witnesses is ongoing work. You get in touch with them, get an answer, conduct some checks, and so forth. I don't want us to undermine the established procedure for drawing up a list of witnesses. A witness may also agree to appear on a given date, and then we say otherwise before that date. That's part and parcel of the procedure.

That said, bearing in mind that April 13 is the end date of this study, I think we can address this issue no later than April 15.

• (1835)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Lauzon.

You have the floor, Mr. Albas.

[*English*]

**Dan Albas:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

If we were travelling in an automobile together and you were driving, you would find out quickly that I'm a bit of a backseat driver. We actually have two different visions here. Both talked about a motion, but I do believe Mr. Barsalou-Duval has mentioned it twice.

For the simplification of this committee's thought process, having a debate about two different propositions at the same time is not healthy because then we don't know what we're speaking to. Perhaps we could just say that the friendly amendment was received, and that is what we are debating. If the Liberals are unhappy with Mr. Barsalou-Duval's changes, then they should simply oppose that and shoot down the completed motion altogether.

I just think it would be helpful for us right now if you were just to say that we're talking about Mr. Albas's motion with a friendly

amendment. Then we can debate that, and we can have a clean vote. We can all go home, and I will stop telling you how to drive.

**The Chair:** I appreciate the help, Mr. Albas. After six years as the chair, I'm sure I really need it.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**The Chair:** I will say that I appreciate healthy debate and healthy discussion. If there is a way for this committee to come to a conclusion and find solutions that are in the best interests of Canadians, that's always my approach as chair.

We threw around the date of April 15. Is that something that is amenable to colleagues to start this? It's five meetings away.

**Dan Albas:** No.

**The Chair:** I'm just throwing it out there. If this is something we feel we should start earlier, that's also something that can be looked at by the members.

[*Translation*]

Do you think April 15 is too late?

You have the floor, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

**Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** It's too late, but I can suggest a compromise.

I know that I moved an amendment to add: "with the exception of meetings for which witnesses have already confirmed their presence" but my Conservative friends may be amenable to a different wording indicating that these two meetings should take place before a certain date, which would be fairly soon.

That might be a way forward if we can all agree on that. I am opening this debate to everyone. I am looking for constructive solutions.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** I'm seeing a lot of nodding heads, which is good.

**Dan Albas:** Could we not just look at tacking this work onto existing meetings? In that way, the Liberals will know that they're still going to get their port study done. If we add an extra hour or two onto several meetings, we all work a little bit longer—I get that—but then this thing happens quicker. Perhaps you can even start booking on Tuesday or Thursday.

**The Chair:** I was just asking the clerk whether or not it's possible for us to say that instead of having the meeting on April 15, we set the deadline of having the meetings before a certain date. Obviously, that's with the availability of the witnesses, but if we give them dates and ask them if they can appear on any of these dates, like we've done in the past, I can bring it back to the committee and say what the dates are that they can appear, if it's close enough to the deadline we've given them.

We did that after we had to cancel for Canada Post and Via Rail, and then we found the next available date. Does that work for committee members?

The issue right now is that—

• (1840)

**Dan Albas:** Can you tell us what the viability of that would be?

**The Clerk of the Committee (Philip den Ouden):** We should clearly define what this is looking to do, and maybe we could discuss that. At this point, it's not clear exactly what is being asked.

**The Chair:** Correct me if I'm wrong, colleagues. We're basically throwing out the random date of April 15 as the deadline to host these two meetings. That gives leeway to the witnesses to appear.

You're proposing two meetings. Is that correct, Mr. Albas?

It's the 11th today, so it's a month, even though we're not sitting for two weeks of that. Technically, it's only two weeks. I'm throwing that out there. I don't know if it's even possible.

Monday is the only day, I believe, that we have booked with witnesses confirmed. We lose a day there—the Monday we get back from the break, which is the 23rd. That would leave us with the 25th and then we're on break again. Then we're gone for two weeks, so it really doesn't leave much time.

Go ahead, Mr. Albas.

**Dan Albas:** I think that we need to think a little bit outside the box here. Perhaps there's an alternative day that we can sit on, as I said, amend the existing dates we have. For example, on the 23rd, we could add an extra meeting for an extra two hours there.

Conservatives are fine to be flexible. We just think this needs to come forward sooner rather than later.

**The Chair:** What are your thoughts, colleagues?

Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[*Translation*]

**Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** I think we'll talk about April 15. We could simply say that the two meetings must be held before or no later than April 15. That gives us the necessary flexibility to move up or reschedule witnesses for the current study and to decide how we will schedule both meetings.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Is everybody on board with this?

Just so you know and just to protect the clerk here, he will do his darndest to get them here. If it's not possible, he will communicate that. He'll publicly communicate if we're having an issue—perhaps one witness can only appear on another date after the deadline—which can then be discussed by the members.

**Dan Albas:** Mr. Chair, I would just strongly encourage that when you and the clerk endeavour to bring people in, append it to an existing meeting on a Thursday, a Tuesday or even a Friday, until we get this done.

**The Chair:** We will do our darndest as we always have and as we've been able to do with *Via Rail* and *Canada Post*—expeditiously.

**Dan Albas:** Again, this is the thing. We've had where it took 160 days before the Minister of Public Safety came to answer questions on *BC Ferries*. That's just not acceptable.

**The Chair:** We'll work diligently to get this done.

Do I have agreement from all parties on this?

(Amendment agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

(Motion as amended agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

**The Chair:** I think that's it, colleagues. I want to thank the witnesses for appearing before us today.

Thank you for your testimony. We appreciate your time in contributing to this very important study.

With that, colleagues, the meeting is adjourned. However, I want to wish everybody safe travels wherever you're going, whether it's local or far away, as the roads are quite horrific at the time being.

[*Translation*]

Have a good evening, everyone.

[*English*]

Thank you very much. The meeting is adjourned.







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