April 28, 2010

Rail Freight Review Panel
808, Elgin Street
Ottawa, Ontario

Subject: Principle for Rail Freight Service Panel Recommendations

Introduction:

Several submissions will be presented to the panel from Northwest Alberta. As a co-author in reports that reviewed the regional needs I have developed a broad understanding of the regional needs from both short term and long term perspectives. Most of the reports have addressed the real issues that affect the viability of current business. It is essential that they are addressed yet I believe a higher level perspective must be considered by the panel.

There I have prepared this submission in response to the panel's request for input on guidance or appropriate principles in developing their recommendations. The purpose of this submission is to present a recommended principle the panel must use in developing their recommendations. This submission describes the requirements of integrated, long term planning and technology utilization.

Most assuredly the priority issues to address are those that put elements of our economy at risk. The rush to action however must not allow us to over look the needs of the future. Our actions must be guided by trends and observations of success in other countries as it relates to transportation systems planning.

Therefore the panel's decisions and recommendations must be based on a principle of an integrated long term vision for all rail systems uses. Indeed, skilled leadership can determine how to establish a more robust long term rail service system while addressing or eliminating the current issues.

The work of this panel is critical to both the short term viability of those users in Northern Alberta who are distant from CN long haul services and not effectively served due to reliability and capacity limitations of the current systems. Equally important is the panel's work in developing or contributing to the vision for rail transportation in Canada for the next 100 years. This submission addresses that need.

In reviewing the posted submissions it is quite clear that the current issues and several perspectives of how these issues occurred have been well documented. I have participated in many stakeholder discussions regarding rail and associated freight systems such as containerization and it is clear that the submissions have represented the problems well and provided some credible short term actions. However, it is imperative that the "fixes" don't create future barriers. In fact with good planning, qualified leadership and commitment of all key stakeholders these "actions" should in fact should be first steps in preparing for long term, full application of rail technology in people and freight transportation.

The rationale for this is that our society is becoming more cognizant of their "footprint" and each succeeding generation is moving towards a life style that reduces that foot print. One need only look at Europe to see that it is possible to have highly efficient "total" rail service, freight and people.

Therefore the panel needs to ensure that sufficient foresight is given to the requirements of the next 50+ years to allow any and all investment in infrastructure to be made as part of or a foundation for full use of rail technology.

The following is provided as an illustration of this principle. It describes quite briefly the idea of converting low capacity, poor efficiency urban based rail systems into a highly efficient "commuter" infrastructure. Future investments are then made in appropriate systems with higher capacity freight packaging, handling and transport capabilities in regions outside urban centers. A reasonably typical example is Grande Prairie, Alberta.

Integrated Long Term Rail System Strategy

Society relies on transportation for 2 primary purposes - the movement of people or goods. The infrastructures created from the first vision of rail systems had good success in the formation of the country. The vision of national and regional rail systems is now driven by the service providers who do not have a role in guiding infrastructure development to support the growth of the country.

Now is the time for strong leadership to put forward a new vision for the future infrastructures for people and freight rail services. This will ensure the efficiency of transport systems while embracing principles of change such as identification of opportunity to eliminate, mitigate long term issues with all rail based transport infrastructure.

The current rail freight system was created to take people to areas of growth and extract products of their enterprises. Communities were either the destinations or an outgrowth of these rail systems. The need for efficient product (freight) systems continues to be a priority for businesses and a necessity for competing in global markets. However in small regions there is limited efficiency or expansion to be gained and no vision for growth because of the current rail service provider's business model which focuses on high return on investment. The concept of supply alliances is quite absent in the relationships and planning by CN yet is a strong principle for success in the global economy.

When one considers, in much broader terms, the trends and expectations of society there are now other options. Whereas the initial rail system was "well" designed to serve its early purposes it does not achieve those goals now. Our freight services are less efficient than necessary to serve their current customers, and in the majority of cities rail service as an efficient public transport system is limited or nonexistent. The public "expect" or anticipate efficient public transport but there no long term strategy or plans exist. The opportunity to improve both of these arises from the premise that there will need to be investment in infrastructure to increase basic capacity for transportation and that investment is best made in expanded, relocated rail freight systems.

Current investment in people transport is frequently poorly planned and in some cases very inefficient (extreme example is 23rd avenue overpass in Edmonton). It usually occurs after the fact. At the same time as we commit these extraordinary (unnecessary) funds to create the desirable transport infrastructure for people there is very little investment being made in rail freight systems and much controversy over the desirable components of an efficient, rural regional system.

Hence the opportunity to make a difference. Infrastructure should be created to guide and develop society and not build as a reaction or response to poor planning. This is not traditional thinking in Canada although in other countries it is well developed. Do we have the will to do it?

Given the state of the current rail system and more importantly its location one can say it has in many ways outlived its freight service capabilities (inefficient, costly, limited growth of services). However due to the nature of the design and location of those systems there now exists a functioning transportation system that could, without significant new investment, become the main corridor for regional people transport.

As an example, the current rail system within Grande Prairie, Alberta has insufficient yard space, creates logistics issues for rail shippers, significant traffic impact (including hospital crossing). Yet that same system is essentially a backbone in the layout of the city, lending itself very well to be a corridor for intra-city transport and easily used to provide transportation services to outlying businesses and residential areas. It provides a core service to economic growth, urban renewal and reducing the impact on the environment of such cities.

By relocating rail freight and associated services, such as containerization, and utilizing existing infrastructure for public transit both the short term freight issues can be addressed and an important foundation for long term efficient, environmentally acceptable public and freight transport can be established.

By creating a long term vision for rail freight services that is integrated with future people transport requirements the trends for reducing environmental impacts can be met with efficient and appropriate investment of public capital for infrastructure.

The infrastructure investments necessary to improve rail freight systems would therefore be invested in relocation of freight systems to areas for more efficient operation. At the same time the "in city and shorter "intercity" lines can easily be converted to people "hubs" that would serve residential and existing and new commercial and retail enterprises.

I would be pleased to answer any questions the panel may have and I applaud the leadership that is being shown in undertaking the renewal of the vision for our country's transportation systems.

Sincerely,

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