



High Frequency Rail (HFR): A project that would benefit the entire community

**Brief presented by the City of Drummondville
to the House of Commons Standing Committee on
Transport, Infrastructure and Communities**



On behalf of the Drummondville City Council, Mayor Stéphanie Lacoste would like to thank the members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities for the opportunity to share her views and concerns about the high frequency rail (HFR) project and the development of passenger rail service on the South Shore of the St. Lawrence River.

Drummondville

Drummondville is the 15th-largest city in Quebec and the primary city in the Centre-du-Québec administrative region. Over the past decade, its population has increased significantly year over year, and the city has experienced ongoing development. Drummondville is recognized for its vitality and its role as an economic driver, and local residents continue to build on this momentum.

One reason it is doing so well is that Drummondville is in a strategic geographic location: it is at the crossroads of major highways and is located in the middle of the most densely populated area of Quebec. Drummondville is a prime location for doing business, as it provides modern economic infrastructure that supports the prosperity of the economic community. It is a great place to call home for those who would like to combine economic opportunities with a high quality of life.

Because of this dynamism, the population continues to grow. With more people travelling between Drummondville and major city centres, transportation is an issue that must be addressed. In fact, Drummondville is well positioned to serve as a transportation hub for a 21st-century solution to inter-city transportation.

Long-time supporter

The City of Drummondville has been a long-time proponent of the HFR project, which was first spearheaded by VIA Rail. For many years, the community, and therefore the City, has been advocating for an initiative like this. The chamber of commerce and industry, local elected officials and businesses are among the various stakeholders who are in agreement about adding rail services that would put us on even footing with other G7 countries, 30 years into the 21st century.

However, it is important to note that the **City's support for this project has always been and continues to be conditional on maintaining, improving and enhancing services on the South Shore of the St. Lawrence**, in a context where Drummondville facilities would serve as an important stop, or hub, between Montreal and Quebec City, just like Kingston is between Toronto and Montreal. Drummondville residents, and many other people who live south of the St. Lawrence, would then be linked to Ontario and Toronto, connecting through Montreal via the HFR. **However, implementing the HFR service should not involve cutting service to areas that currently have service.**

In Canada's fight against climate change, we firmly believe that it is important for Canada to expand its public transit networks. Many regions of the world, including Europe and Japan, can serve as a model for us in that regard. Providing a high level of service will contribute to the cultural shift needed to ensure the successful implementation of HFR and the resulting improvement of services on the South Shore.

Historical milestones and current issues

While the topic of developing an improved and efficient rail link in the Quebec City–Windsor corridor has been in the news regularly for more than 40 years, it was in the fall of 2015 that VIA Rail's President and CEO, Yves Desjardins-Siciliano, shared the outline of a major project for high frequency rail, known as HFR.

The cities of Drummondville and Trois-Rivières immediately understood the benefits of this project and agreed to support it with one voice, rather than bickering about what route the HFR should take. Rather than North Shore OR South Shore, we have opted for North Shore AND South Shore. This support was formalized at a press conference held by the mayors of both cities in June 2017.

VIA Rail quickly supported our joint position, which would ensure that a North Shore route using dedicated train tracks would not replace existing rail service in regions on the South Shore, including Drummondville, where dozens of people take the train every day to go to Quebec City or Montreal, commute to work, visit friends, or take part in cultural or sports activities. Residents from other regions also travel by train to get to and from Drummondville.

In August 2016, the CEO of VIA Rail confirmed that the development of HFR would involve repositioning the passenger transportation strategy on the South Shore of the St. Lawrence by creating a hub in Drummondville for inter-city transportation. Is it worth noting that the South Shore is more densely populated than the North Shore and has several medium-sized cities that benefit from rail service. In addition to Drummondville, there are the cities of Saint-Lambert, Saint-Hyacinthe, Victoriaville and Lévis.

Around that time, VIA Rail also announced that trains between Montreal and Quebec City would become more frequent, increasing gradually to eight trains in each direction (over a period of two to three years). **This commitment has not yet been fulfilled.**

In addition to the issue of train frequency, we are dealing with issues related to train service times and reliability.

In terms of train service times, the current schedule does not allow passengers to return to Drummondville from Montreal or Quebec City after an evening out, nor does it allow passengers from Montreal or Quebec City to return home after an evening in Drummondville. As a result, it is not possible to go to Montreal or to Quebec City to watch a show and come back by train that same evening.

In terms of reliability, there is no definitive answer: many delays are due to the fact that passenger trains and freight trains share the same train tracks, with priority given to freight since the tracks are owned by Canadian National (CN). The result is long waits on sidings that end up discouraging people from taking the train.

Each of these issues limits passenger growth.

An essential social and economic contribution

In order to continue its growth trajectory, Drummondville must be able to count on improved passenger rail service. It is an undeniable and indispensable advantage for the census metropolitan area of Drummondville.

The accelerated development and dynamism of the Drummondville area, as well as its advantageous location in Centre-du-Québec, make it a key partner for this major project that will benefit residents of Quebec and Canada.

In recent years, the City of Drummondville has been very proactive on this matter. In addition to its support for the HFR project, it has taken major steps to facilitate the development and implementation of the future hub, including acquiring the land surrounding the station to facilitate its operations and the eventual revitalization of the area. These efforts will make it possible for trains to spend the night at the station; similarly, there is enough room to install a maintenance yard, and, lastly, to provide space for administrative staff. In addition, the City has made significant progress in adding a multi-level parking facility a few metres from the station, ensuring that people can drive to the station and take the train.

The City also considered the HFR project in its urban planning process for the downtown area. **Clearly, for Drummondville, developing a *central station* is at the heart of its urban development.**

Right in the heart of the city, just steps from the future signature district of *Fortissimo*, this area is an up-and-coming neighbourhood. Improving passenger rail service is key to revitalizing and densifying this vital and strategic sector. The City has already developed and analyzed a number of very promising development scenarios.



In a context of labour shortages, worker mobility is one of the solutions that employers are focusing on. Worker mobility also promotes inter-city trade and establishes closer ties between Drummondville and major city centres. It is also important to note that Drummondville businesses rely on the availability of skilled workers from neighbouring regions, which increases the pool of workers available within an hour's travel time.

In addition, the City of Drummondville is implementing a strategy to promote the propulsive service industries sector in the area, which would contribute to, and benefit from, successful passenger transportation projects. Drummondville is so attractive to residents because it is a nice place to live, with a more affordable housing market than in bigger cities. These are all arguments in favour of ensuring that families are able to maintain mobility, where they could live locally and commute to jobs elsewhere.

Lastly, it is important for the Drummondville tourism sector to have reliable rail service. For recreational tourism that promotes local attractions, it would mean local stakeholders could target larger audiences. The availability of tourist activities in the area is remarkable. Take, for example, the Village québécois d'antan, a world-class tourist attraction, the Maison des arts Desjardins in Drummondville, and the many cultural and sporting events offered annually, including a popular poutine festival.

Drummondville is also known for business tourism. Its convention and trade fair centre, the Centrexpo Cogeco, is one of the largest and most modern in the province. It is important to facilitate access to public transit across Quebec through reliable, accessible and sustainable public transit options. This is a win-win situation, since the train company will see its ridership increase due to the influx of business people to Drummondville, and Drummondville will be able to continue to develop its choice offering in terms of conventions, symposiums and other seminars.

Time for action: our expectations and recommendations

The City of Drummondville believes that it is high time to take action and move quickly to ensure the implementation of the HFR project and the improvement of service on the South Shore of the St. Lawrence.

We believe that improving service between Montreal and Quebec City on the South Shore cannot wait for the HFR project to come online. Action must be taken now, accompanied by ongoing and significant funding. We therefore urge the Government of Canada to ensure that its partners in this area take concrete action quickly.

Among the actions that must be initiated as soon as possible, we recommend:

- That work be undertaken to develop train schedules for Drummondville departures and arrivals:
 - o These revised schedules should address concerns about train frequency and service times and should ensure that VIA Rail meets the commitment it made several years ago to increase the number of trips a day from five to eight;
- That work be carried out to identify all available stretches on the Montreal–Quebec City corridor where the tracks could be twinned or, at the very least, sidings could be added to reduce how many times passenger trains are held up, and for how long, which would ensure greater reliability; and
- That infrastructure implementation plans associated with the hub role be developed, in cooperation with the City of Drummondville, to promote the harmonious and appropriate integration of these infrastructures with the projects currently being analyzed by the City for the *central station*.

We believe that this work can be done independently of the development and delivery phases of the HFR project, and without any further delay.

In conclusion, we would like to reiterate the City of Drummondville's commitment and collaboration regarding this matter. It is a priority issue for elected officials in Drummondville and for the municipal government.

Our city will always be on your side when it comes to implementing tangible projects that improve the quality of life for residents, as well as supporting economic development by fighting climate change.