



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

---

# Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities

EVIDENCE

**NUMBER 126**

Thursday, September 19, 2024

---

Chair: Mr. Peter Schiefke





# Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities

Thursday, September 19, 2024

• (1545)

[*English*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 126 of the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities.

I want to remind all members before we start the meeting to read the best practices guidelines on the cards on the table. These measures are in place to protect the health and safety of our participants, most notably our translators, whom we have in the back over there.

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

I have some general comments. I'd like to remind all participants of the following.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. All comments should be addressed through the chair.

Members, please raise your hand if you wish to speak, whether you're participating in person or via Zoom. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can.

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

I'd now like to welcome our witnesses.

[*Translation*]

We have three representatives from Via Rail Canada: Mario Pélouquin, president and chief executive officer; Rita Toporowski, chief service delivery officer; and Denis Lavoie, general counsel.

Welcome to all of you.

You will be given up to five minutes for your remarks, after which we will proceed with a round of questions.

I now invite you to take the floor.

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin (President and Chief Executive Officer, VIA Rail Canada Inc.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. Although I wish it were under different circumstances, I recognize that it is absolutely necessary for me to be here today to revisit the regrettable incident involving train 622 on August 31.

My first words today are addressed to those who unfortunately spent too many hours on board this immobilized train. I'm deeply sorry for what happened and offer my sincerest apologies to all of them.

On behalf of Via Rail's management and board of directors, I can confirm that one word sums up what happened on August 31: unacceptable.

As the fourth generation of my family to work in the railway sector, trains are in my blood. This summer marked my fortieth anniversary in the industry. It's a great honour to work for Via Rail, and I want Canadians to continue to have confidence in our trains.

Our values put passengers at the heart of our decisions, but it's clear that on August 31 we didn't live up to them.

Via Rail has therefore commissioned an independent investigation to get to the bottom of what happened. Once we have the report of this investigation, we will carry out an in-depth review of our emergency management action plan to ensure that such a situation does not happen again.

I am committed to ensuring that all shortcomings are identified and corrected quickly.

But to avoid waiting, I have also already put in place corrective measures so that we can immediately better meet Canadians' legitimate expectations of Via Rail services.

[*English*]

Firstly, when a train in the Quebec-Windsor corridor is affected by a mechanical breakdown or any other situation that is likely to cause a significant delay, we will assess the situation in real time and implement an evacuation procedure, if feasible.

Secondly, I have asked for an immediate review of the training requirements in particular, to ensure that all employees are better equipped for difficult situations.

Thirdly, we will be revising our communications protocol with Transport Canada officials to enable a more rapid exchange in the event of major issues.

Finally, we want to examine exactly what led to this unfortunate situation for our passengers. While we are proud of our new fleet of trains in the Quebec-Windsor corridor and are confident in the reliability of this new equipment, we are conducting a comprehensive assessment. It would therefore be premature and unwise at this stage to speculate on the root causes of the mechanical failures that affected train 622, although we know now that it was not a single failure but a series of events.

Unfortunately, the breakdown of two weeks ago reminds us of what happened in December 2022. While Via Rail successfully implemented the key learnings and recommendations from 2022, this most recent incident revealed significant shortcomings, which we are addressing.

I want to reiterate that I'm deeply sorry for what happened, and I offer my sincere apologies to all passengers on board train 622 and their families.

On behalf of Via Rail management and the board of directors, I can confirm that one word sums up what happened on August 31: "unacceptable".

[*Translation*]

Our sole raison d'être is to serve our passengers. They are at the heart of everything we do at Via Rail. This was clearly not the case on August 31 aboard train 622. Although an isolated incident, what happened on train 622 is a serious lesson whose causes and consequences will be scrupulously analyzed to make Via Rail a carrier that lives up to our customers' expectations.

Ladies and gentlemen, it will now be my pleasure to answer your questions along with my colleagues Rita Toporowski, our chief service delivery officer, and Denis Lavoie, who is in charge of launching the independent investigation into this incident.

Thank you.

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

Today we will start with you, Mr. Berthold. You have the floor for six minutes.

**Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, Mr. Péloquin, Ms. Toporowski and Mr. Lavoie. Thank you for your apology. I think the passengers deserve a public apology, which you have reiterated.

However, I must admit that, at one point during your remarks, I got shivers. You mentioned that what happened on August 31 was not the result of a single event, but of a series of events that occurred at the same time. It leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, reminding me of the Lac-Mégantic tragedy, where exactly the same thing happened. It was not a single incident, but a series of events that occurred at the same time and that led to the tragedy that killed 47 people. I just wanted to share my emotional reaction. I did not expect to go there. This proves that, when incidents like this occur, we must take them seriously, particularly when passengers are involved. These big machines can also kill hundreds of people. Therefore, I find that "unacceptable" is a paltry word to describe incidents like this when we have no answers as to what happened.

Mr. Péloquin, you said that you were going to establish a new communication protocol with Transport Canada. How were the events of 2022 a lesson for Via Rail? How will a communication protocol improve matters from now on with Transport Canada, when it seems that the discussions between the department and Via Rail in 2022 produced no results in terms of safety at Via Rail?

• (1550)

**Mr. Mario Péloquin:** The 2022 incidents and the subsequent investigation helped us improve several aspects of the procedures and protocols we had at Via Rail, including the internal communication protocol and the one with the Department of Transport.

The events of August 31 showed us that, even after new measures were put in place in 2022, there were still shortcomings. That is why we immediately took measures to correct the shortcomings that we quickly identified. We also launched an independent special investigation to see if there were other aspects that we had overlooked.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Mr. Péloquin, it has been more than two years since these events took place, and the measures are still not effective.

The incident did not occur in the middle of nowhere, but along Highway 20, with buses and villages nearby. Something could have been done other than leave hundreds of people on a train for 10 hours. This is beyond unacceptable. In fact, I read the minister's comments, and he too called the situation unacceptable.

What were the first communications between the minister's office and Via Rail regarding this incident? Who initiated the communications?

**Mr. Mario Péloquin:** In accordance with the protocols we currently have in place, we follow a procedure when we see that an exceptional incident needs to be reported to the department. On August 31, internal communications were unfortunately not sufficient. Therefore, we notified the people at Transport Canada, the minister's office, the deputy minister and the Via Rail board of directors around 6:50 p.m.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** When did you first have contact with the minister's office or with the minister himself? Have you spoken with Minister Rodriguez?

**Mr. Mario Péloquin:** Yes, I spoke with the minister on the Tuesday after the incident.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** That was 48 hours later.

**Mr. Mario Péloquin:** Yes. It was early afternoon on the Tuesday.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** The incident does not seem to have been as important to the minister as it was to the passengers who experienced it.

**Mr. Mario Péloquin:** Unfortunately, I couldn't tell you how important he deemed the situation to be.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Before contacting the minister or before the minister contacted you, had you already made the decision to conduct an investigation?

**Mr. Mario Péroquin:** I feel you should know that, internally, Via Rail executives sent communications pointing out targeted shortcomings that needed to be addressed immediately. One of the things that had to be done was determine exactly what caused the incident where, unfortunately, passengers were stuck on the train for too long.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** Mr. Péroquin, I understand the processes and protocols, but I would remind you that, when incidents like this occur involving people, rapid communication is paramount. It is inexplicable that you did not communicate with the Minister of Transport that same day, that you or one of your peers did not pick up the phone to contact the minister, and that the minister, after seeing in the media that an incident like this was taking place, did not bother to communicate with you to try to see if anything could be done for the passengers. Every effort should have been made to help the passengers on the train when they were in trouble, not 48 hours later.

What lessons have you learned from the incident? Do you think more effort should be made? Should you authorize people to call you on your cellphone as soon as a problem like this arises, where a train sits on the tracks for so long?

• (1555)

**Mr. Mario Péroquin:** Absolutely. Via Rail executives are available at all times to receive calls or other forms of communication.

**Mr. Luc Berthold:** When did you become aware of the situation?

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Berthold. Unfortunately, your time is up.

I now give the floor to Ms. Koutrakis for six minutes.

**Ms. Annie Koutrakis (Vimy, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being with us today. This is not your first time. Welcome.

[*English*]

We all know that all passenger transportation companies have unfortunate situations several times a year. Whether that affects the passengers, the public or employees, they have plans to deal with all kinds of such situations. I know Via Rail has dealt with numerous incidents, probably hundreds, over the years, from accidents to suicides, train or infrastructure failures, freight train derailments, medical emergencies, terrorism, etc.

My understanding is that procedures require an immediate mobilization of everyone who can contribute to be part of the emergency team required to resolve or mitigate the problem. I also know that Via Rail has been a leader in customer service, including recovering from such incidents, and is rated by customers as providing superior customer satisfaction, which is objectively measured.

Is my introduction not true? Are my assumptions not correct? If my assumptions are correct, I'd like to know, what went wrong?

**Mr. Mario Péroquin:** Your introduction is accurate. What happened on August 31, it's important to note, was an isolated incident. We deal with situations, as you pointed out, regularly, because we operate on a network of over 20,000 kilometres across the country,

with mixed traffic and so on. We deal efficiently with all types of situations every day.

To discuss a bit about what we've discovered so far that went wrong on that day, I'd like to pass the microphone over to my colleague, Ms. Toporowski.

**Ms. Rita Toporowski (Chief Service Delivery Officer, VIA Rail Canada Inc.):** Thank you.

If I may, just to begin, I wish to apologize to the passengers who were unfortunately held on that train for much too long on that particular day, August 31.

Having said that, I would like to address what we found and what we've discovered. Since 2022, we did learn some lessons. Very specifically, we realized that we needed to take better care of passengers on board the trains, to take a look at what our protocols were with alternate transportation, and to make sure we were visible, offering food and water on board the trains, as an example. Those protocols were maintained and held.

Although the communication on board the train was frequent, the unfortunate part was that the information regarding where the rescue would happen and at what time it would happen was lacking. That's what caused many issues on board the train.

**Ms. Annie Koutrakis:** I'm sorry to interrupt you, but that almost sounds like what happened in December. In your testimony, Mr. Péroquin, you mentioned that. If that was the issue back then, how can it be that such a short while later, we're still dealing with the same thing, and that's communication?

I'd like to know, what broke down? If there were new protocols in place, and new communications, what happened this time around?

**Ms. Rita Toporowski:** May I continue?

Thank you.

Related to the communication, we do have a protocol in place in terms of escalation. That's where the failure was. For the team that was working on the problem, as Mr. Péroquin mentioned earlier, this incident was an isolated incident. It was unique in that we had two mechanical failures on the same train.

The first mechanical failure took about two hours to fix, at which point the train started to move again. After moving for 30 minutes or so, there was a secondary mechanical failure. Having addressed the first one, the team had to move its mindset to solving the second one. The problem-solving was around what we could do to fix that train and move it as quickly as possible.

We did make calls to look for alternate transportation. We contacted 10 bus companies. None were available.

We were in contact with CN throughout the whole time. During those kinds of incidents, we work well with them in terms of trying to come up with solutions. They did offer an opportunity to remove the train as well. Our train was closer and had a better opportunity to move that train in the future.

Regarding the communication, as I mentioned, what happened was that we were trying to solve the problem and move the passengers as quickly as possible. The failure was in not escalating as quickly as we needed to.

**Ms. Annie Koutrakis:** I am concerned about the new train. These are fairly new trains that were purchased from Siemens.

Has Siemens been helping to resolve this issue? Have they been responsive? We've paid a lot of money. Canadian taxpayers and passengers who pay for the service have paid a lot of money for those new cars. Is Siemens covering the costs incurred by Via to address the disruption and the resolution of the technical problem, and are you satisfied with their responsiveness?

I think it would be important to address that issue for the Canadian people who are watching us today.

• (1600)

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** Absolutely, the team at Siemens, the local team in Montreal, is helping us commission the new trains right now that we're receiving at a rate of one a month, and sometimes two. The team of engineers and so on in Sacramento is also supporting us every day.

With this incident, it's important to note that although we identified what the first cause of the mechanical failure was, we're working closely with Siemens to identify all the other aspects of the secondary cause that caused the locomotive engine to shut down, which caused the more significant delay afterwards.

I can tell you that they are working in collaboration with us, and they're helping us discover all the mechanical aspects of this failure.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Koutrakis.

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

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

Witnesses, thank you for being here today. I think it was highly necessary to hear from you at the committee about a situation like the one experienced on the Labour Day weekend, which, as you mentioned, is unacceptable.

Like everyone else, I was shocked when I saw it on the news. I found it hard to believe that an incident like this could happen again. It seems to me that the situation that occurred in December 2022, where people were stuck on the train for long hours, was unacceptable. Now we see that the same thing has happened again.

I'm going to read you an excerpt from Via Rail's statement published on January 10, 2023. You said: "Beyond not having met the

expectations of our customers, we have not lived up to our own standards ... it is clear that lessons will be learned, and changes will be made."

In December 2022, a train was stranded, there was no communication, the toilets were out of order and they ran out of food and water. A trip that was supposed to last three hours turned into a 14-hour journey.

In the September 2024 incident, a train was stranded, there was no communication, the toilets were out of order and they ran out of food and water. The train was stranded for about 10 hours.

It seems to me that nothing has changed. Can you explain that to us?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** These are two completely different situations. I will give you a bit of background.

The first situation was caused by an ice storm. Nearby roads, including Highway 401, were blocked or closed, so the arrival of emergency aid proved to be a bit more complicated compared to the situation in the summer of 2024. The train was stranded for a long time. A tree fell on it. A Canadian National train derailed. These were really very different circumstances from what we experienced a few weeks ago.

In this case, the train was stranded, but as Ms. Toporowski explained, the repairs were done in less than two hours and the train was able to start running again. At that time, we had no reason to believe that there would be another mechanical failure shortly afterward. As Ms. Toporowski also explained, the locomotive's engine cut out and the team began working to find the source of the mechanical breakdown and see what more could be done.

**Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** I understand what you are saying. There is a difference between the two incidents, and I recognize that. In the case of the 2022 incident, a tree fell and there was a snowstorm. In 2024, however, the broken-down train was in an accessible location. In my opinion, it would have been possible to bring in supplies, allow people to get off the train to change their itinerary or even provide a bus to transport them to their destination. In spite of all that, they stayed on the train for 10 hours.

I understand that you could not have foreseen the second problem. As you say, there was a problem, you stopped the train for two hours and resolved the problem, but then another one arose. Many hours went by between the second problem and the time people arrived at the station. It wasn't initially supposed to take that long.

You have to put yourself in the shoes of regular people stuck in a metal box for hours on end, unable to go out, eat or use the washroom. Eventually they get quite distressed and demand accountability.

I feel that the lack of communication we saw in the 2022 incident happened again in 2024. From what we saw in the media, people felt powerless, in the dark and at a loss. I would not have liked to be in their shoes.

• (1605)

**Mr. Mario Pélouin:** I'm not sure that was a question.

**Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** I'm actually trying to understand how you intend to improve your communications. Personally, I get the feeling that there is an obvious customer communication problem and that it is recurring.

**Mr. Mario Pélouin:** I will let Ms. Toporowski answer that question, but just before that, I want to clarify a few things.

In terms of the mechanical failures that I explained briefly, please note that the power was out only when the locomotive engine stopped running, and the outage lasted less than two hours. Since the washrooms and air conditioning system run on electricity, those services were out of order for 90 minutes. The rest of the time they were working.

Ms. Toporowski will address the issue of communications.

**Ms. Rita Toporowski:** I will add to what Mr. Pélouin just said.

[English]

The cases were different. Notwithstanding that, when the second mechanical issue happened, passengers were offered food throughout. We have emergency snacks on board the train the whole time. Until they were actually depleted, water was available the whole time, except for a short portion of time during which the power was out. Otherwise, water was offered as well.

Notwithstanding that, the length of the delay was completely unacceptable from the passenger perspective. You're right. Being stuck in something for that length of time increases the level of anxiety. The communication with the passengers was frequent. The issue was with the information that was actually being shared, which wasn't satisfactory in terms of where the solution was going to come from.

Even when the solution came to move the train backwards, to get it to an area that we deemed safe to start the rescue onto another train, that took about an hour. The transfer of passengers from one train to the next took about another hour, after which point they moved to Quebec City. There were chunks of time.

The failure from a pure communication...from what I see, is our ability to actually internally escalate to continue trying to solve the problem in one case, and then on the separate case asking what we can do creatively to get emergency services or somebody else involved to support this.

I think the escalation was what was missing.

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

Next we have Mr. Bachrach.

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

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP):** Thanks very much, Mr. Chair. Thank you to the team from Via Rail for being here.

As I was listening to the responses and questions from my colleagues, I was just thinking about what it must have been like for those passengers on the train for 10 hours, not knowing what the outcome was going to be—an incredibly frustrating situation, to say the least, and probably scary for some of them. I appreciate that there's been an apology.

I also can understand why there might be frustration out there that this is the second incident in a short period of time. Passengers want the confidence that these problems are being worked out and that they can ride the train knowing that if something goes wrong, there's an effective plan in place. I look forward to hearing what that plan will be. I also appreciate the team from Via Rail reaching out and briefing me on the specific circumstances of train 622.

Now, Mr. Pélouin, in your remarks you mentioned immediate corrective measures. Of those, lots of them seem like things that were probably also taken after the 2022 incident—reviewing training requirements, revising communications protocols, examining what happened. Those are things that I would hope every company faced with a similar situation would do. The one that stands out as being somewhat different is the decision to evacuate if feasible.

Is this a significant departure from past protocols that Via Rail has had?

**Mr. Mario Pélouin:** I would start with saying I fully agree with you that the length of time the people were on board is unacceptable, and the entire executive and the board agree that this is the case. That's why we apologized: We didn't follow due process to make sure that we looked after our passengers in the correct way.

When I talked about the immediate actions that we've put in place already, some of them may sound like a repeat of 2022, but I can assure you that it's a step up from those things, because we learned from what happened on August 31. We looked at what we had done in 2022 and said, "What else can we do?" The evacuation process is new.

We put it in place immediately after, because, as Madam Toporowski explained, it's normal when you have a mechanical failure that a lot of people focus on trying to fix that and trying to bring the train to destination. We now have a new protocol in place so that before there's a length of time of delay, as soon as we have an unusual situation—a mechanical failure or other—we will convene the executives together and have a conversation about what happened and what we're finding out in real time, and will make a quick decision to evacuate the passengers if it looks like we cannot get them to destination in a reasonable period of time.

That's brand new. We've never done that before in such an organized way, and this is now the process that we have in place.

• (1610)

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Was the feeling that if that protocol had been in place when this incident occurred, passengers could have been evacuated feasibly, given the proximity of the highway, as Mr. Berthold described?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** Yes. Thank you for that clarification question.

We would have taken steps if the communication protocol had worked properly. We would have made arrangements quicker. However, it's important to note that where the train was actually stopped was not a safe location to evacuate, because the railbed is elevated. There was a small forest. Although the highway wasn't very far, there was a forest, and we had a lot of people with different mobility abilities on the train. We needed to move the train to a safe location where we could do the evacuation—or the transfer, in the case of August 31—while keeping the passengers safe.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Mr. Pélouquin, you mentioned that 10 hours is unacceptable. I think everyone around the table agrees with you on that. My question is, what would be an acceptable amount of time given that trains are going to break down? Via Rail operates over thousands of kilometres of track across the country. In the corridor between Toronto and Quebec City, if you were to manage people's expectations, what would be an acceptable or reasonable expectation for an incident response time on the corridor?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** Of course, every situation is going to be very different, so we can't really point at a number of minutes or hours. I'll give you a couple of examples. Typically, we handle situations very efficiently and the train continues on its journey to destination, and sometimes we evacuate people off trains. If there's a freight train derailment, for example, in front of our train, we'll take measures right away, because we know that it's going to take a long time to reopen the track.

It really depends on the situation. For some of them, we can see that within an hour, two hours or three hours the track will be passable again. In others, like in this case, we didn't know, and we should have done something different.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** I have only a few seconds left.

My last question is around the procurement of the new long-distance fleet. Given that this fleet operates in much more remote areas than the corridor across the country, will the design specifications provide for operation of the toilets and provision of water for

extended periods well beyond what the Siemens fleet on the corridor currently allows for?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** Of course, the design of the new cars that we're going to buy for long distance is not completed at this point, and any lessons we learn from this event of course will be brought into the design of the new cars, working with manufacturers to make sure that on long-distance trains we will provide all the safety and comfort that people expect for a longer period of time.

[Translation]

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

[English]

Thank you very much, Mr. Bachrach.

Before I turn it over to Mr. Lawrence, the interpreters have asked if you could kindly please speak more loudly into the microphones, just so they can hear and translate properly.

Thank you.

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

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

Mr. Pélouquin, I know you to be an upfront, straightforward rail professional. I appreciate your contriteness here today.

I do have some tough questions, as I think the situation demands that I ask.

The first of them is this: Prior to this incident, when was the last time you talked to former minister Rodriguez?

• (1615)

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** The last time I talked with former minister Rodriguez was shortly after he was named Minister of Transport last year.

**Mr. Philip Lawrence:** That was, I believe, in June or July 2023.

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** From memory, it's July or August 2023.

**Mr. Philip Lawrence:** Thank you.

Have you ever discussed with former minister Rodriguez what happened in Cobourg, with the delay there and the protocols you've put in place to help prevent this in the future?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** I did not have conversations with the minister very often, but I do have regular conversations with the deputy minister and other officials at Transport Canada.

**Mr. Philip Lawrence:** I know Mr. Berthold asked this, but I want to just clarify.

When was the first time the minister or the minister's office contacted Via with respect to this situation?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** The minister's office responded on Sunday early afternoon, and I had a call organized with the minister for Tuesday at 12:30.



**Mr. Philip Lawrence:** He didn't contact your office; Via contacted his office.

Is that correct?

**Mr. Mario Péroquin:** Yes. As per our arrangements with Transport, we contacted different officials in the ministry, and we made them aware of the situation at around 6:50 on Saturday evening.

**Mr. Philip Lawrence:** To me, as has been said, this is a very difficult situation, really. As you have said, it is an unacceptable situation, particularly when—Cobourg, of course, is in my riding—it happened a couple years before, during Christmas. We were supposed to put in protocols that would have stopped that, and we had it repeat. I think that's fair.

You contrasted a bit between the Cobourg and Quebec incidents. I would actually say that the Quebec incident is far worse, because an ice storm may not be predictable, but certainly a mechanical failure of a train is something that will happen again and again.

You were unwilling to answer my colleague Mr. Bachrach's question with respect to the hours it would be. I understand that every hour will be different, but if not now, could you commit to saying that in the future, the maximum amount of time would be five hours?

Could you even commit to the fact that there will always be enough food and water on a Via train that, should a delay happen, this will not be repeated again, and for no period will Canadians be without food or water?

**Mr. Mario Péroquin:** As we've mentioned a couple of times, we are investigating now the events of that day, with an independent team as well. I'm sure we're going to get good recommendations from that.

As far as food on board, after the December 2022 events, we stocked the train with emergency supplies, as Madam Toporowski explained a moment ago. We did have those emergency supplies and additional water on the train that we deployed as per the lessons learned from 2022.

Unfortunately, there's not enough to last forever. We even ordered supplies from outside to supply the train at that time.

**The Chair:** Mr. Péroquin, I'm sorry to cut you off.

I don't think we have translation in French.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval can confirm that for me.

[*English*]

We're going to wait to confirm that we do have translation, and then we'll restart the clock.

You have one minute and 10 seconds left.

Colleagues, we're going to suspend for five minutes until we rectify the situation with translation.

This meeting is suspended.

• (1615)

(Pause)

• (1625)

**The Chair:** I call this meeting back to order. Thank you all for your patience.

Mr. Lawrence, you had one minute and 10 seconds left. The floor is yours, sir.

**Mr. Philip Lawrence:** The challenge I have, Mr. Péroquin, is that this is a recurring issue. We had an incident in Cobourg and now an issue in Quebec.

In addition, over the time Prime Minister Trudeau has been in office, Via has received nearly \$8 billion. Your executives will receive, on average, \$1.1 million this year. You are doing very well as an organization, but Canadians continue to suffer. Now we hear that the then Minister of Transport contacted you only once prior to this, then several days afterwards. This is not acceptable. Unfortunately, this Liberal government's response is to now have a part-time transportation minister. My question for the government is, when will you take transportation seriously?

Here is my question to you: What can you offer Canadians to tell them that we won't see this happen a third time—Canadians being stranded with limited food and water for 10 hours?

**Mr. Mario Péroquin:** It's important to note that this was a very isolated incident. We have about 20,000 train starts every year, with 80% of those train trips arriving on time or within 30 minutes of their scheduled arrival time.

As far as making sure this does not happen again, the measures we highlighted earlier will go a long way to ensuring it doesn't.

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Iacono, you have the floor for five minutes.

**Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the entire Via Rail team for being here this afternoon.

On January 26, 2023, the committee met with Martin Landry, Via Rail's interim president and chief executive officer. I believe that Ms. Toporowski also attended that meeting. During his appearance, Mr. Landry stated that Via Rail must “absolutely learn lessons from these events to adjust [its] protocols in the future.”

I'm sure that you followed the protocols in place during the December 2022 event. I want to know whether any protocols have been changed since December 2022. If so, could you provide a list of all your protocols and any changes made since the December 2022 events?

Have you established protocols?

• (1630)

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** Thank you for the question. The short answer is yes.

**Mr. Angelo Iacono:** Good.

To your knowledge, were these protocols applied in the case of train 622, on August 31, 2024?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** Thank you for the clarification.

As you said, Ms. Toporowski attended the meeting on January 26, 2023. I'll let her answer the question.

**Ms. Rita Toporowski:** Thank you for the question, Mr. Iacono.

[English]

Yes. We've established different and improved protocols since December 2022. They were in place. They were related to food, water and the treatment of passengers on board the train—

**Mr. Angelo Iacono:** I'm sorry to cut you off, but I have only five minutes.

I'd like it if you could also provide, on that list, the protocols set in December that were followed for this incident. Also, I'd like to know whether Via Rail staff followed the protocols, and what the protocols are that they're supposed to follow.

I would like to say, overall, that you have a lot of protocols for different people on board—different staff or employees, be it at the train station, the control station or elsewhere.

Therefore, I'd like, through you, Mr. Chair, to get a readout of those protocols and also a highlight on whether those protocols were followed.

I have another question: Do you keep a log of all actions undertaken in due course of an emergency?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** We have a control centre that takes care of all communications in all of the events that happen on Via Rail.

**Mr. Angelo Iacono:** Thank you.

[Translation]

I would like the Via Rail officials to also give us, if possible, a record of everything undertaken on the day of the event. This could include activities, calls or measures.

My next question is the following.

[English]

Who is the person who is to be called when an incident occurs? Who is the first person who gets called?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** Depending on what type of event it is, there are different escalation processes. In this case, of course, as the problem escalates, different people get involved until the chief of that division, Madam Toporowski, is alerted, and then she alerts me.

**Mr. Angelo Iacono:** Okay. After you are alerted by her, who else gets alerted?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** There are parallel protocols that are in place. Before Madam Toporowski gets advised, there's another protocol that advises the situation centre at Transport Canada, so that

they know there are things happening that are not normal. I advise the office of the minister, the deputy minister and the board of Via Rail.

**Mr. Angelo Iacono:** Is the chief of police advised?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** The chief of police is involved in those protocols. They are aware.

**Mr. Angelo Iacono:** When is he advised?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** I'll ask Madam Toporowski to answer.

**Ms. Rita Toporowski:** When there is a disruption, the initial call goes to our operations control centre. They assemble the right team of people who are involved in it, be it from a police perspective, the railway operations perspective or the customer experience perspective, in order to actually solve the problem.

**Mr. Angelo Iacono:** Why did it take so long for some action to be taken? If you're saying that certain protocols were followed and the right people were advised, why did it take so long, close to six hours, before some action occurred? You have a control centre. What did the control centre do? What is established at that point?

I know this is going to come out from your protocols, but we'd like to hear. Do you have a crisis operations centre that takes place right away?

• (1635)

**Ms. Rita Toporowski:** The operations control centre receives the information and, based on the type of incident, triages. It depends on who is involved in it and what needs to be happening to solve the problem. This particular—

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, but we're already over time. Perhaps you can finish that the next time Mr. Iacono has the floor or when I pass the floor over to Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[Translation]

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

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

So far, much has been said about the infamous delay of train 622. A 10-hour delay is indeed dramatic and striking. However, two other trains were delayed. Train 26 was delayed by one hour and 25 minutes. You could basically say that this is a normal occurrence. Meanwhile, train 24 was delayed by five hours and 45 minutes. According to media reports, the people on board train 24 received only a bag of pretzels and a bottle of water during this time.

Do you find this normal? First, is this a proven fact? If so, how come? Isn't there a protocol for serving people a meal after a certain amount of time? I think that five hours and 45 minutes is a long time to wait when all you get is a bag of pretzels.

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** I'll let Ms. Toporowski answer the question.

**Ms. Rita Toporowski:** Thank you for the question, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[English]

On all our trains, the minute there is a delay, we have a protocol in terms of continuing with other service so that it's accessible to everybody, be it business class or economy class. After 45 minutes, we provide protein bars, pretzels and/or cookies, which we have as emergency snacks on board. Every 45 minutes afterwards, we do the same thing to replenish, along with water. That's what the protocol was for trains 24 and 26, given the delays that they had. That was adhered to.

[Translation]

**Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** I gather that no meals were served on train 24, but bags of pretzels were distributed every 45 minutes. Is that right?

[English]

**Ms. Rita Toporowski:** That's including the existing service that was currently on the train, which continued to be offered during the delay.

[Translation]

**Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** Personally, I find that odd. However, it's your decision.

Suppose that it's 1 p.m. and the train is five hours and 45 minutes late. This takes us to 6:45 p.m. Personally, if I had to eat a few bags of pretzels during that time, I would find it difficult. It seems that the situation can be tricky for people whose health differs from my own, or who must adhere to a more restrictive diet. That said, you be the judge.

I have only 20 seconds left. If you don't mind, Mr. Chair, I'll use this time later.

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

[English]

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

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

One of the similarities between what happened in December 2022 and what happened recently in August was that it was a holiday weekend. They both occurred on holiday weekends. I'm wondering whether the availability of staff on a holiday weekend had any impact on Via Rail's response.

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** Of course we're aware that during a holiday weekend, people do have a tendency to take a holiday weekend, but our staff complement is not reduced. The operations control centre is functioning as usual. Of course, on board trains and so on, they function as usual. For the people who are involved in the operation of the railway, there's really no difference.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** I know that in this situation, you sent a train from Ottawa that was eventually able to tow the broken-down train. In talking to folks who are familiar with the European rail system, in the U.K. they actually station surplus locomotives along the rail line at certain intervals specifically for that purpose, as rescue locomotives. Is that an option that Canada should look at, particularly for the corridor, where there's a higher frequency of traffic?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** We operate a very different type of system in North America, in Canada, than you would see anywhere in Europe. We don't have a supplement of locomotives that we could store all over the country in case of an emergency. We use the majority of the rolling stock that we have every day.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** In this case, CN Rail has freight trains running on the same tracks. I've discussed with your team the potential for CN to provide assistance in a situation like this. In a maritime environment, there's actually a legal requirement to go to the aid of mariners who are in distress. Should Transport Canada look at a similar regulatory framework? I ask this knowing that CN are often co-operative and want to help get you out of the way because they need to get by, but should there be a more formal regulatory requirement for other rail users to come to the assistance of broken-down trains?

● (1640)

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

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

Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

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

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

I want to direct my questions to you, Ms. Toporowski. We had you here in January 2023, after we had the first incident in December 2022 of the train that was stopped for 14 hours near Cobourg. I want to delve a bit further and probably get a bit granular on the issue of the lack of food and water.

While we've heard here that maybe that was just a slight blip, that certainly contrasts with what we've heard from passengers in stories in the media. We're going to have passengers here before this committee as well, so I'm sure we'll hear some direct accounts.

I want to read back a couple of sentences from what you said when I asked that question about protocols for food and water back on January 23, 2023. You said the following:

It's based on the number of passengers, but over and above that, we add  $x$  per cent of the number of meals, extra snacks, extra drinks and so forth. In addition to that, because of our experience over many years, we have dried emergency snacks in case of an emergency event when there's an unexpected delay. In addition to that, we also board additional cases of water.

Given that, I'm wondering what the percentage was in December 2022 and what the percentage was in August 2024. What does it need to be? It sounds like it's not enough.

**Ms. Rita Toporowski:** Thank you for the question, MP Muys. I can provide the information regarding the ratios back in 2022. For the current ratios, I don't have them currently available to share with you right now.

The emergency snacks were available. There were three different types made available. The difference is the way in which we handed them out. There was food on board the train, which we actually depleted completely as we continued service, and then whatever was left we gave out as well. There was also pizza that was ordered and delivered. That's a difference as well. We tried to make it available. The minute we knew that we were running out of food and were making a point of trying to determine where we could move that train to that would be safe, we called ahead to a pizza company and basically had them deliver to the train in Laurier, so that we could offer more food when we were able to get to that location.

**Mr. Dan Muys:** To Mr. Péroquin, in terms of the discussion here, being contrite and apologies are one thing, but what is the plan to restore the public trust? If you're a regular passenger of VIA, or even the general public, this is now the second time, and it's three strikes, you're out. What is the plan to restore that public trust?

**Mr. Mario Péroquin:** I want to start by saying that, really, this is an isolated incident, because we have 20,000 train starts every year. The majority of those are to the satisfaction of the clients who travel by train, and those customers keep coming back on our trains. I wouldn't say that the confidence of the travelling public is not there.

Of course, this event is unacceptable. Although isolated, it's something that we are addressing very seriously, and we want to make sure it does not happen again.

We're taking measures. We talked about supplies of food and supplies of water, but if the measures we've taken now to make sure this does not happen mean that it doesn't happen, then the supplies of additional food and so on become moot at that point.

**Mr. Dan Muys:** You talked about the revision of the communications protocols with Transport Canada. Maybe you can get into a bit more detail as to what has changed since December 2022. I know the investigation is ongoing, but what would you anticipate needs to change further?

• (1645)

**Mr. Mario Péroquin:** The official protocol to notify the situation centre at Transport Canada is that the operations control centre is to notify Transport Canada if there's an event that is not usual: significant train delays, collisions, incidents, accidents and so on. I have discussed with the deputy minister that I would personally advise him, and we have either myself or another colleague advise the office of the minister if there is any situation that is abnormal. That is above and beyond what we had agreed to before, a few years ago.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

Next, we have Mr. Badawey.

Mr. Badawey, the floor is yours. You have five minutes.

**Mr. Vance Badawey (Niagara Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First off, I want to comment on the comment Mr. Lawrence made about us taking it seriously. You can be rest assured that

Transport Canada has a culture within the department to take every situation like this seriously.

Phil, you know me better than that. You know me very well. We take it very seriously.

Folks, this is 2024. These things shouldn't happen in 2024. It's simply unacceptable.

I know, Mr. Péroquin, that you had discussions with then Minister Rodriguez. He asked that an independent investigation on the incident be under way, as well as, within 30 days, to come back with an emergency management plan. What's the status of that work?

**Mr. Mario Péroquin:** You're absolutely right. It's unacceptable. Although it's an isolated incident, one is too many. We fully agree with that.

I did have a conversation with the then minister on the Tuesday after the long weekend, and shortly after that received a letter indicating what he wanted, actions he wanted Via Rail to perform in an urgent manner. We are to respond within 30 days, as you highlighted.

We've already provided an interim response to that letter. Within two weeks, we prepared an interim response that highlights the actions that we've already taken, and we're working through the independent investigation, under Mr. Lavoie's leadership, to provide a full response within the timeline.

**Mr. Vance Badawey:** I apologize. I have five minutes. I'm trying to get to this, and ultimately it meets the expectation of this committee, because the questions I'm asking are for them, so they can get this into the report, and, therefore, we can come up with some solutions so that this doesn't happen again, working with you folks and other partners.

I would request that the investigation report, as well as the emergency management plan, be submitted to committee as part of your testimony, so we can actually put it into the final report.

The second question is with respect to improving the way you communicate with your passengers—this is all about the customer—on trains and providing basic care, etc., with respect to major service disruptions.

I don't have time to dance on this, so getting granular, Mario, what are you doing better now versus what you were doing then?

**Mr. Mario Péroquin:** The actions we already put in place will go a long way to making sure that we don't have to deal with consequences later. If we now have a protocol for communications internally so that the executives know right away when there's a situation that is abnormal, that will allow us to not wait for the protocol to go through but to take quicker action to make sure that we look after our passengers in real time.

Also, we're looking at all the other aspects of what we can do faster and better, so that we don't have to deal with a situation in which passengers are on a train for 10 hours.

**Mr. Vance Badawey:** Thank you. This might seem like somewhat of a digression, but it's not. It is relevant. We are in the process of building an HFR- and HSR-dedicated track, as you are well aware. Of course, having a track that's dedicated to cargo versus people would have helped out, especially with the disruption that you caused not only for people but with respect to the supply chains vis-à-vis, in this case, CN Rail. One reason that we're looking at a supply chain logistics strategy is to integrate the different methods of transportation—being water, rail, road and air—and this is part of the reason.

My next question is, how are you working with CN and CP? This goes to Mr. Bachrach's questions as well, because they were very relevant. How are you working with CN and CP Rail to, one, prevent disruptions in supply chains; two, deal with this situation directly—and I don't have to repeat what that situation is—and, three, look at the ability to work with CN and CP toward having the redundancy available so that the train can be moved more quickly onto a siding, and, therefore, dealing with the folks there as well as opening up the track for supply chains?

• (1650)

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** Of course, when we run on a freight railroad, they're very aware of the situation because they, the railroad, are the host that controls train movement. When we're blocking their track—in that case it was a single track—it can have an impact on the logistics of moving freight traffic around, so we work very closely together.

As Madam Toporowski explained a moment ago, they offered to help with the situation by pushing our train out of the way, but train number 24 was arriving at about the same time at that location, and we chose the option of using our train because they could connect easier. It's a seamless connection and they can provide power to the disabled train, so for us that was a better option, given that it was the same time frame.

However, I can assure you that we work in close collaboration with CN, CP, GO Transit, Metrolinx and so on at all times to make sure that, as much as possible, there's no impediment to either freight or passenger traffic.

**Mr. Vance Badawey:** With respect to compensation to the passengers, can you clarify the level of compensation passengers are entitled to when an incident such as this occurs? As well, I expand it to ask, what compensation will actually be added to the cargo that's expected to move on that track but that, because of the situation, sees time elapse while it gets to its final destination? That's compensation for passengers and for those who were held up because of the train taking up the space on the track.

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** We have a compensation protocol. On the day of the event we fully refunded the passengers on train 622. Also, we gave them a full credit for their trip. The passengers on trains 24 and 26 got partial credit, because they were disrupted on their trip.

We haven't had conversations with CN Rail, as of yet, about compensation for potential delays to freight traffic. I'm not aware to what extent freight trains were delayed, so that's to come later if there's—

**Mr. Vance Badawey:** It was all affected, so can I ask for those reports on the investigation results, the updating of the emergency management plan, the communications plan and any compensation that you would otherwise have given to the passengers as well as to CN Rail?

**The Chair:** We'll make sure that the clerk follows up to obtain those documents.

**Mr. Vance Badawey:** The interest, Mr. Pélouquin, is in having it added to the testimony and, therefore, forming part of the report, so we can actually take next steps to make sure that the outcomes we all expect are undertaken.

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

Next we go to you, Mr. Vis. I add 30 seconds onto your time because we added 30 seconds onto Mr. Badawey's time. The floor is yours, sir.

[Translation]

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

I want to thank all the witnesses for being here today.

I just have a few questions for the sake of clarity.

At the start of your testimony, Mr. Pélouquin, you said that any shortcomings would be identified and quickly addressed. Can you tell us when we'll receive the results of the internal investigation?

Can you also provide an update on the questions asked by Mr. Badawey?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** Of course, the investigation isn't over yet. The investigation is multi-faceted, with the aim of determining exactly what happened on August 31. It's quite complicated. We're thoroughly reviewing all these aspects. An independent investigation is also under way.

We have already obtained some results and taken steps to address the situation. However, the investigation to determine the causes of the mechanical incident is still ongoing. We haven't found all the root causes yet, but we'll do so as soon as possible.

**Mr. Brad Vis:** Do you have a rough idea?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** Mr. Lavoie can comment on the independent investigation.

**Mr. Denis Lavoie (General Counsel, VIA Rail Canada Inc.):** As Mr. Pélouquin said, the independent investigation is well under way. We should be able to publish the results, findings and recommendations this fall.

• (1655)

**Mr. Brad Vis:** Okay.

During his appearance before the committee in January 2023, Mr. Landry emphasized the need to acknowledge the stress generated for employees by these delays. He said the following: “Of course, priority was granted to passengers, but we must also understand the impact on our employees and take good care of them.”

In your opinion, did Via Rail employees receive sufficient training and support to properly meet the needs of passengers during the August incident?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** When we hire employees to work on the trains, they receive training. I would even say that it's fantastic training. Clients who travel by train tell us that Via Rail's service is better than any other service in the service industry. That's a good thing. We also provide ongoing training.

Our employees on board did a tremendous job during this event. We heard this from a number of the passengers on board, even though they weren't happy to have been on the train for such a long time.

[English]

**Mr. Brad Vis:** I would actually agree. I'm a British Columbian. The very few times I've even been able to take Via Rail in my life—because it's a service that generally doesn't exist in my province—it has been a phenomenal experience.

That leads me to my next question. If you will indulge me for a minute, I would be remiss if I didn't ask this for my constituents. I represent a small town called Lillooet. It's a traditional train hub. My constituents wanted me to ask you directly, could they get passenger rail service again from Vancouver to Lillooet and on to Prince George? I represent many remote indigenous communities that are fully reliant on trains.

What can British Columbians expect from Via Rail to help give them a level of service that exists in other parts of Canada?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** As president of Via Rail, I would love to do more to serve more Canadians across the country. That's the overall answer. Unfortunately, as I've said in answer to another question earlier, I have limited numbers of rail cars and locomotives. They're all being used right now for the service that we're offering today.

**Mr. Brad Vis:** That's too bad, because many people in British Columbia have more experience taking Amtrak down to Bellingham versus Via Rail to communities in Canada. Thank you for recognizing the lack of service that British Columbians receive, and your understanding that we can do better, perhaps, in the future.

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

Next, we will go online to Mr. Rogers, for five minutes.

**Mr. Churence Rogers (Bonavista—Burin—Trinity, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, welcome to the folks from Via Rail who are with us today. I know you've characterized this particular incident as being unacceptable. You've apologized profusely to your passengers, of course, and to everybody publicly. I know the former minister wrote a letter, which MP Badawey referred to, asking you to do a certain number of things, such as an independent investigation and so on. All that's ongoing.

One of the things I'm curious about is, for the passengers, the people who were on the train, or on any of your trains for that matter, what's the level of compensation that passengers are entitled to when this type of incident occurs? What are your current compensation policies?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** Thank you for that question. I'll hand it over to Madam Toporowski to answer.

**Ms. Rita Toporowski:** Thank you, Mr. Rogers.

Our compensation policies are based on the degree of the delay. Typically, it's either 50% or 100% travel credits for the travel they were delayed on. In this particular case, with train 622, given the extensive delay and conditions and the fact they were on that train for so long and there was a level of anxiety, obviously, from our customer side of things, we offered a 100% refund, recognizing the fact that it was unacceptable from a service-level perspective and from a well-being perspective.

● (1700)

**Mr. Churence Rogers:** Was there any special consideration for people who are physically challenged and trying to access the trains and so on? Was there any particular kind of compensation for people who might be disabled or need more assistance?

**Ms. Rita Toporowski:** Any kind of delay for our passengers is unacceptable, and once again I apologize to all the passengers who were on that train, but regardless of what type of passenger they are and who they are, we offer the same level of compensation. If there's additional support they need on those trains, that's what our onboard staff is trained for as well, to offer additional assistance as required.

**Mr. Churence Rogers:** Following up from that, I'd ask about your complaint mechanism for customers who received what they consider to be bad service. Obviously, in this case, it was an isolated incident, but there's terrible service based on the reports we've heard. How are these complaints from this particular group of passengers being responded to in general by Via Rail?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** I'll start by saying that we handle every single complaint we receive personally. We don't send mass letters or anything like that. An interesting fact for that train—and Madam Toporowski will correct me if I'm wrong—is that we've received a number of complaints, of course, for that train on that day. We've also received a number of complaints from people who were not on the train, which is interesting. They complained about the service on board the train, but they were not there.

Madam Toporowski can speak to some of the particular complaints that we received and how we handled them.

**Ms. Rita Toporowski:** We take all our passenger complaints very seriously, and we do have a mechanism when they come in via email or voice mail or through our call centres. Sometimes they're mailed directly to Mr. Pélouquin, me or other executives. They're responded to specifically related to the issue they're addressing.

With respect to what happened on August 31, there were a number of complaints that came in. Notwithstanding the ones that Mr. Pélouquin mentioned, we've gotten about 43 complaints from passengers on train 622. They are being responded to.

As part of our outreach to find out what happened on those trains, we've interviewed 30 passengers as well, at random amongst different cars, to find out the level of service, how we performed in terms of our protocols, which ones were adhered to and where they found failings. We're hoping that, with the complaints that were proactively sent in to us as well as those that we're going to seek, we'll get better information in terms of what they would look for in the future.

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

Thank you very much, Mr. Rogers.

[*Translation*]

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

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

Mr. Pélouquin, I want to come back to the issue of delays. You said that the recent situation was an isolated incident. I tend to agree with you. It was like a Guinness record for delays. It was an isolated incident, even though the 2022 incident also comes to mind. I don't know whether there have been other equally extreme delays in the meantime. Aside from the extreme and unpredictable situations that may occur from time to time, people generally agree that Via Rail has a reputation for being late. For the average person, Via Rail is synonymous with delays.

I checked your latest annual reports. In 2011, 84% of trains were on time. In 2017, it was 73%. In 2023, it was 59%. That's quite a significant decline. We can see that the situation has only gotten worse over time.

How do you plan to address this?

I understand that Via Rail has a growth plan and must deal with a greater number of passengers. People like to take the train. Personally, I do. However, when we see that the train is always late, we end up losing faith. Sometimes, when we want to be sure to arrive on time, we decide not to take the train. We know that it isn't usually on time.

• (1705)

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** Can you clarify your question?

**Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** How will you address the issue of constant and worsening delays?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** As you know—we talked about this at our last appearance—we control when the train leaves the initial station. Afterwards, since our trains use infrastructure that doesn't belong to Via Rail, we have no control over the interaction with other trains and all the other events. As a result, we incur delays beyond our control.

We talk a great deal with the host railways, for both freight and commuter trains, to optimize the situation. The fact remains that we must deal with the infrastructure that our trains use.

**Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** It's amazing to see how the percentage of late trains has increased since 2011. That year, trains were on time 84% of the time, which means that they were late 16% of the time. By 2023, the proportion of trains running on time had fallen to 59%, which means that the trains were late 41% of the time. The rate for delays rose from 16% to 41%. That's a staggering percentage.

I imagine that tough discussions are taking place. There must be ways to solve this problem. It really doesn't make sense for trains to run late 41% of the time.

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** Canada's train operating system differs significantly from the system in Switzerland, for example, where trains are probably on time 98% or 99% of the time. We operate a complex system where freight trains and passenger trains use the same tracks. This means that the interactions are more complex than the ones seen in Europe.

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

[*English*]

Next we have Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours for three minutes, sir.

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

I liked my colleague Mr. Vis's earlier line of questioning, and I hope he and I can work together to ensure that Via Rail has adequate resources to expand public passenger rail throughout the country, including on the routes that it hasn't had the resources to operate over the years. Certainly that would help northwest B.C., where we've seen service reductions over the decades.

My question is about the new Venture fleet. You know, we've had this situation, obviously, involving the new trains. On Sunday, I took the train to Montreal, and we were stuck in the station for an hour while they figured out some kind of mechanical issue. With a new fleet, obviously, there are going to be adjustments, and there's a period of breaking in the new equipment, but I'm wondering, Mr. Pélouquin, based on your 40 years of working in the rail sector, if you could characterize how the transition to the new fleet is going. Are the Siemens train sets working out better, worse or as expected?

**Mr. Mario Pélouin:** Right now we're about halfway through the fleet reception for Via Rail, and it's going very well. Our relationship with the supplier of the trains is working very well. It's a complex process to receive a train, test it, commission it and put it into service, and I can say that the collaboration is great.

Having seen trains and light rail subways in my days in New York, I would say that it's on par with what we can expect with the delivery of new rolling stock.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Thank you.

Mr. Chair, if I could, I'd like to move a motion. I think it would be really helpful to the committee to hear from the staff on board the train as one of the groups that were obviously affected. It was challenging for the passengers. I'm sure it was also extremely challenging for the staff, and as we're doing kind of a comprehensive survey of this incident, I would like to move a motion that the committee invite representatives from Unifor to appear as part of its study on the August 31 incident involving train 622.

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

Is there any discussion on that? Is that something we would add on to a meeting, or were you thinking about using the time, perhaps...? We have two passengers appearing. Were you proposing that they would appear for the first hour and the second hour could be with Unifor, or are you proposing that we add another meeting on, Mr. Bachrach?

• (1710)

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** I think that would be adequate for sure. We have an existing meeting with the passengers appearing, and if they appear for an hour as a panel and we do a second panel with the employees, I think that would be adequate.

**The Chair:** Okay, we've all heard the terms of the motion. Do we have unanimous consent?

(Motion agreed to)

**The Chair:** Okay. It is adopted.

Thanks very much, Mr. Bachrach.

We still have two people left here on our list.

We'll start off with you, Mr. Lawrence. You have five minutes, please.

**Mr. Philip Lawrence:** Mr. Pélouin, I understand that there are lots, thousands, of trains that go across your rails. However, I am struggling a little with your use of the word "isolated". I'm just going to rattle off some of the report. I'm sure there's much more than this, but these are just some that my staff have been able to pull up.

In 2019, a Via train hit debris and was delayed for four hours. In 2020, a B.C. pipeline protest caused delays for five days in a row. In September 2022, a train was delayed for five hours between Toronto and Windsor for mechanical issues. On December 23, 2022, trains were cancelled and delayed for up to 18 hours. On October 5, 2023, a train between Montreal and Ottawa was stuck for six hours due to mechanical issues. On May 18, trains were delayed for hours due to a suspicious package. Then, on September 1.... That's what brings us here today.

Trains are going to break down. It's a machine; it's going to break down. Weather is going to happen. My challenge here is that we have had numerous incidents, and we're still leaving people stranded for 10 hours with very limited food and water.

Can you still say with a straight face that this is isolated, and that it's one time?

**Mr. Mario Pélouin:** I can assure you that it is an isolated incident. We have 20,000 departures every single year, and 80% of those train trips are either on time or within 30 minutes of arrival on time, which is really a good record. Of course, there are events like you just named, a long list, that are outside of our control. If a suspicious package is left somewhere, we don't want to take any chances with the safety of our employees, our equipment and the passengers, especially.

**Mr. Philip Lawrence:** Thank you.

My concern, once again, is not that these happen but that there wasn't a plan. Particularly, you're talking about the willingness to unload passengers, which is just coming out now. That didn't come out of the Cobourg plan, and it didn't come out of the other half a dozen things.

Is it your evidence today that the passengers should have been evacuated?

**Mr. Mario Pélouin:** Given what we discussed a little earlier, we put a protocol in place very quickly to ensure that we start evacuation procedures when we think there is a situation that's going to put the passengers on the train for too long a period of time. It varies depending on the circumstances. Absolutely, if we had known that it would be that long, we should have evacuated the passengers off that train much earlier.

**Mr. Philip Lawrence:** Thank you for that.

I'm just conveying my disappointment and the disappointment, I think, of Canadians and rail passengers that this thought process or protocol did not occur many years ago. It could have saved these folks 10 hours and some considerable stress, especially around the holidays.

You say that it's isolated, which diminishes it, but I talked to some of the folks from my riding about the Cobourg incident. Being stranded for 18 hours is bad enough, but when you're doing it with your kids, your grandkids, your parents and others expecting you around the holiday season, it's extremely stressful. It would be my strong suggestion, my recommendation to you, that anything above five hours is just unacceptable. We have to be able to get to people and to get them unloaded within five hours, no matter what happens.



**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** The new protocols we've put in place now will ensure that we act quickly and decisively in case of a situation where we believe—not that we know—that there's going to be a delay that is unacceptable, as it was on that day. Much earlier and much faster, we'll make decisions in real time as soon as we're aware of a situation like that.

• (1715)

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

[*Translation*]

I'll now give the floor for five minutes to Mr. Lauzon, who is joining our committee for the first time.

**Mr. Stéphane Lauzon (Argenteuil—La Petite-Nation, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm delighted to be a member of this committee for the first time.

I'll get straight to the heart of the matter.

Mr. Pélouquin, you told us a number of times that Via Rail train delays or shutdowns were an ongoing issue that affected thousands of passengers every year. I'm really struck by these disruptions. A number of factors contribute to these disruptions. You spoke about bad weather conditions, for example, but also about mechanical issues and conflicts with railway companies. It's quite difficult to predict these unknown factors.

How will you integrate all these unknown factors into an action plan to address the issue?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** We have a great deal of experience in operating passenger trains on a mixed-use network that covers about 20,000 kilometres. Our experience helps us to understand quite quickly and clearly what can happen on the network, and the seriousness of each possible event. Based on our experience, we can quickly determine whether service can continue within an acceptable time frame, or whether we must take measures that differ somewhat from the normal course of business.

**Mr. Stéphane Lauzon:** How are your relationships with the railway companies, such as Canadian Pacific and Canadian National? Do you maintain a close relationship with these companies in order to establish protocols, given your dependence on them?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** Of course, we have a close relationship with these companies. I communicate with their executives myself. Communication also takes place at other levels between people at Via Rail and people from these host railway companies. So we have quite a close relationship.

The priorities differ from company to company, but we talk about the best way to achieve a level of satisfaction that everyone can live with. The fact remains that we don't own the right-of-way.

**Mr. Stéphane Lauzon:** I want to talk a bit about this. For most of the territory, Via Rail doesn't own the tracks. We know that the infrastructure is aging. What's your role in this?

I know that you're in constant contact with senior officials and the minister's office. What's your role in promoting the need to invest in railways?

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** We don't own 97% of the tracks across the territory where we operate our trains. That said, Via Rail performs

quite well on the 3% of the right-of-way that it does own. For example, on the Montreal-Ottawa route, around 97% of the trains run on time. We own the right-of-way and we control train movements and infrastructure maintenance.

In contrast, we can't really tell private companies such as Canadian National and Canadian Pacific where they should invest their track maintenance funds. That's their decision. However, we work with them to try to minimize the impact.

**Mr. Stéphane Lauzon:** One issue that you raised concerned the food on board the train. You told us that it was possible to bring pizza or other food.

If pizza could be brought to the train, could passengers have been able to leave the train? Has this been assessed?

• (1720)

**Mr. Mario Pélouquin:** Good question.

We always assess the situation in terms of passenger safety. For example, disembarking from a train stopped on a track is complicated and difficult. We need to think about seniors and people with reduced mobility, for whom it isn't always easy to walk on the rocks along the track. Sometimes, the track is surrounded by forest. We assess all this in real time. Obviously, the easiest situation would involve a platform, a level crossing or something of that nature.

I'll let Ms. Toporowski finish answering the question.

[*English*]

**Ms. Rita Toporowski:** Thank you.

In this particular case, the pizzas were ordered but weren't actually delivered until we were able to move the train to a safe location, because it was not deemed to be safe to disembark the passengers at that point in time, nor would it have been a safe location for some food to be delivered. Therefore, we had to wait until—

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Stéphane Lauzon:** Okay.

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

Thank you, Mr. Pélouquin and Ms. Toporowski.

[*English*]

Before we conclude for the day, Mr. Iacono, you wanted to ask for documents to be produced, I believe.

**Mr. Angelo Iacono:** Yes. That is correct, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Péroquin, I'm glad to hear that you've highlighted today new protocols that you intend to implement after this incident. Can you also add these to my previous requests? We'd like to see an evolution and maybe have a better analysis, so that our report can highlight that with you.

**Mr. Mario Péroquin:** I'm happy to.

**Mr. Angelo Iacono:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** That is so noted, Mr. Iacono. We will add that to the request for the documents that we would like to have to provide to our analysts, and the clerk will get on that.

On behalf of all committee members, we want to thank our witnesses from Via Rail for joining us today.

Thank you for your time and for responding to our questions so diligently.

With that, this meeting is adjourned.

---







Published under the authority of the Speaker of  
the House of Commons

---

### SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

---

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

---

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité  
du Président de la Chambre des communes

---

### PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

---

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

---

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :  
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>