

VIA Rail and CN Main Line Proposal – Perspectives from Discover Saskatoon and the Saskatoon Regional Economic Development Authority

ISSUE

In December 2023, a group of Saskatchewan City Mayors presented to a City Council Committee advocating for the City's support seeking to "alter the current route of VIA Rail's *the Canadian* from its current route on the CN Main Line to the CN Prairie North Line through Saskatchewan and Alberta". Discover Saskatoon and the Saskatoon Regional Economic Development Authority (SREDA) reviewed the proposal and generally support it. This report summarizes their collective feedback.

BACKGROUND

At its December 2023 meeting, the Governance and Priorities Committee (GPC) considered a letter and submission from a delegation of Saskatchewan City Mayors, led by the Mayor of the City of Lloydminster. After consideration of the item, GPC resolved:

that the Administration engage Discover Saskatoon and SREDA for an initial assessment of the implications of this proposal to move the Via Rail route from the CN main line to the Prairie North Line and report back.

CURRENT STATUS

See the next section of the report.

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

The Administration engaged with the Chief Executive Officers of Discover Saskatoon and SREDA. They prepared a joint response summarized as follows:

Current Situation:

Currently, the Saskatoon station's capability as a visitor gateway is notably limited. With no proper platform and an annual passenger count of around 200, the station falls short of providing a welcoming experience. This aligns with VIA Rail's assessment that any new location would markedly enhance our visitor engagement.

Opportunity:

This proposal opens a significant opportunity. VIA Rail's new policy allowing passengers to de-train for brief stays presents Saskatoon with a chance to attract overnight visitors. This could significantly boost our hospitality sector and enhance our city's economic and cultural profile. The opportunity to enhance the arrival experience with a new station in Warman would not deter travellers from staying in Saskatoon.

Partnership Potential:

The team at Discover Saskatoon has identified and is nurturing a promising partnership opportunity with Travel Trade partners, VIA Rail, and Indigenous Tourism Canada. This

collaboration could effectively promote the VIA Rail Canadian Route internationally, particularly in markets like Japan, Germany, Australia, and the UK, thereby elevating Saskatoon's global presence. The current arrival experience at the Saskatoon station is not acceptable for international travellers.

Risks and Challenges:

There are challenges to address. The Prairie North line's suitability for passenger trains requires thorough assessment, considering different standards from freight traffic. VIA Rail is not aware of the viability of the Main Line as a passenger carrying route. Additionally, any route changes must consider the impact on VIA Rail's schedule, especially concerning daylight travel through the Canadian Rockies which the schedule is constructed around. More work is likely required to understand these factors.

Benefits of a New Station:

A new station, potentially in Warman, could revolutionize the visitor experience. It offers an opportunity not just for an enhanced arrival point but also for developing a hub that integrates local transport options. Collaborating with the City of Warman and other stakeholders will be crucial in realizing this vision.

While this proposal presents exciting possibilities, it demands careful planning and collaboration. Discover Saskatoon is committed to supporting initiatives that elevate Saskatoon's status as a key destination and is ready to engage further in this transformative project.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct financial implications to the City of Saskatoon. However, the proposal does not estimate the fiscal costs to the Government of Canada, VIA Rail and other organizations who may be affected by the proposal.

NEXT STEPS

Next steps are subject to the direction of GPC.

Report Approval

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