

Getting Windsor on track

GUEST COLUMN

BY JOSEPH PASSA

Re: Rail Line: High Speed Back On Track?, Feb. 16.

I agree the time has come. We should connect our cities with high-speed rail in Canada starting in Windsor. California is in the process of linking its major centres with high-speed rail as Japan and Europe has for many years.

In 2007, we became the urban planet with more of our population living in cities than rural environments, which will only increase.

Moving between these growing major centres with land travel as fast as air travel is imperative considering the post-petroleum world is estimated to be fewer than 40 years away.

You can run trains on renewable energy but flying a plane covered with solar collectors is beyond us.

Small electric cars for short commutes and trains for long high-speed travel look to be the way our society could see itself. Air travel in other forms, likely at high altitudes, and efficient water travel over the oceans could be the way we connect our continents.

Where are we now in Windsor? We have the most machine shops, plastic fabricating and assembly buildings per square kilometre in North America with many closed or running on empty.

Our history is cars, but our future should be trains. Windsor could reinvent itself as a manufacturing centre for the design and construction of high-speed trains.

It will take formidable political will for various public-private partnerships for research and development with possibly significant initial investments.

The automotive companies could also shift their focus to train cars with the assembly infrastructure in place. The tracks lead to them now. No one needs to be left out. It is sustainable, green and can be accomplished in stages.

I agree with Glen Fisher who was quoted in the editorial suggesting to upgrade existing routes prior to going high speed.

Getting to 160 km/h is a good first step to assist in rider use and further develop the system. But we must start to build cars as well, which can be achieved by getting manufacturing in place by renovating existing train cars in Windsor as part of that process. There is a window of opportunity by Via for just that.

I attended a meeting in Montreal at the massive Via maintenance yard last month for a "request for proposal" along with my partner firm from the Ottawa-Gatineau area. We are architectural firms as were others in attendance along with Bombardier and other railway industry companies.

The request is to renovate an existing trans-Canada rail car with scenic dome, lounges, bar and accessible accommodation with a new exterior lift for wheelchairs.

The provided prototype car is the rounded rear car of the train with most of these features built in the 1950s. They are our classic "silver streak" rail cars with eventually 29 cars intended to be retrofitted in a similar manner.

In order for a proper response to be submitted, the winning consortium would have to have structural metal machinists, stainless steel fabricators, textile manufacturers, cabinet workers and careful assembly crafts people on board, all of which are now here in Windsor. The Via Rail executives in attendance confirmed that the prototype can be delivered anywhere there are tracks in Canada or to the U.S. border for firms that may be submitting from there. The mockup we also viewed in a shipping container for the accommodation element was designed by a Montreal architectural firm and will be used to developed design procedure.

I believe a sincere group of companies could submit a response from this area and we could start Windsor on the right track for its future.

Our firm cannot do this alone. We would like to hear from other firms that feel that their services could be involved. We will otherwise not submit by the March 20 deadline.

As The Windsor Star has done in promoting its Believe W.E. Can Campaign, let's take the world places with our green technology.

Joseph Passa is a Windsor architect.