

# 'Our future should be trains,' says high-speed enthusiast

BY DAVE HALL, THE WINDSOR STAR AUGUST 4, 2009

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Windsor architect Joe Passa says the growth potential for refurbishment of rail cars and retrofitting of high-speed rail beds is unlimited, and he believes Windsor should get in on the ground floor.

**Photograph by:** Paula Trotter, The Windsor Star

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WINDSOR, Ont. -- If Canada decides to spend billions of dollars building a high-speed rail corridor and trains that can travel along it, Windsor is in a good position to benefit, says a local businessman who has seen the demand for rail work first-hand.

"Our history is cars but our future should be trains," said Windsor architect Joe Passa. "Windsor could reinvent itself as a manufacturing centre for the design and construction of high-speed trains. We can't keep flying planes and using expensive gasoline when we can switch to renewable resources."

Passa said he travels by rail to Toronto on a regular basis and the difference in time between rail and flying is negligible.

"I always allow three hours for a plane trip because of the time you spend travelling to and from airports at both ends," said Passa. "Even at today's speeds, it's well worth it to take the train when you factor in costs and the ability to get some work done as you're travelling."

Passa met recently with Via Rail officials in response to a request for proposals to produce a retrofitted rail car.

Passa said he was in the process of setting up a new company — Windrail Inc. — when the scope of the project increased from retrofitting one rail car to taking on 12 cars.

"We simply didn't believe at this time that our capabilities could handle a project of that size but that doesn't preclude us or anyone else in this area from getting involved in the future," said Passa. "It can cost as much as \$2 million to retrofit a rail car because you're dealing with a number of engineering systems as well as the interior design and we simply weren't in a position to take it on at this time."

Passa said he approached companies in two other cities to set up a partnership, but they showed little interest.

"The financial potential is immense and I guess that's why these companies want to keep it for themselves but there's no doubt in my mind that there are Windsor firms capable of performing this work," said Passa. "We have the most machine shops per capita of any city in Canada and many of them have excess capacity just waiting to be used."

Passa said the growth potential for refurbishment of rail cars and retrofitting of high-speed rail beds is unlimited.

He cited the example of Industrial Rail Services, a Moncton company which specializes in remanufacturing, repairs and refurbishment of rail cars. It was established about 10 years ago and now operates out of a 125,000 square foot shop with 18 service bays, overhead cranes, a metal fabricating shop, training facilities and a new paint shop.

"Windsor is the most capable centre in the country to support the manufacturing infrastructure" for high-speed rail, said Patrick Persichilli, vice-president of the WindsorEssex Development Commission. "It will take a massive overhauling of the rail beds along the corridor as well as the retrofitting or manufacturing of new rail cars and locomotives.

"There's nowhere else in Canada with the expertise, technology, engineering capabilities and shop capacity to match Windsor," he said. "We have the fabrication shops, automation and framing companies as well as businesses specializing in electronics and injection moulding.

Both Passa and Persichilli believe a greater reliance on rail travel is the wave of the future and Windsor companies would be wise to get involved.

"It has the potential to change the culture of our society and the way we travel," said Passa.

Persichilli said that overseas investors looking for opportunities to expand are always interested in transportation infrastructure and how quickly goods and people can be moved between cities.

"High-speed rail lines would transform Windsor into a hub for transportation, logistics and technology and our local manufacturing companies could be at the centre of it all," said Persichilli."