February 24, 2006

Mayor L. Dilanni and Members of Council
City of Hamilton
71 Main St. W.
Hamilton, Ontario L8N 3T4

Dear Mayor Dilanni and Members of Council:

Re: The Restoration of Via Rail Canada Service to Greater Hamilton

The issue of a VIA station in the Greater Hamilton Area (GHA) is tied in with the future of both intercity and commuter rail passenger service in the GHA and its surrounding regional catchment area. A meaningful analysis of this issue cannot be undertaken with a myopic view of the GHA’s needs alone. It is high time the municipality take its place as a regional centre and plan its future in those terms – particularly when it comes to public transportation.

Definitions

GHA: Comprises Hamilton and the surrounding municipalities that have been consolidated into a single administration (Ancaster, Dundas, Stoney Creek, etc.)

Regional Catchment Area: Suggests that area possibly bound by Winona on the east, Lake Erie to the south and Hwy 5 to the west. Includes communities like Binbrook, Canfield, Caledonia, Cayuga, Hagersville, Jarvis, and so on.

Intercity Rail Passenger Service

Traditionally, VIA abandoned its shorter runs in its intercity network to regional commuter agencies such as GO Transit. As the ultimate example, a trip between Hamilton and Oshawa, normally considered an intercity trip, can now also be made under certain departure restrictions entirely on GO with a transfer in Toronto. VIA’s mandate, until recently has been to focus on intercity rail passenger service in the corridor between Windsor/Sarnia and Quebec City. Within that context, restoration of VIA intercity service to the GHA is highly desirable. The question then arises of where to locate a VIA passenger station within the GHA.

In and of itself, the GHA comprises a sufficient market for intercity rail passenger service to merit its own station. The highest population density within the GHA can still be found within the pre-integration municipal boundaries of Hamilton proper. Intercity
travellers originating in/destined for the GHA’s regional catchment area can conveniently utilize the routes suggested in the section entitled The Viability of an Ancillary GO Station in the GHA for access to a north-end VIA station. For these reasons, the Downtown Hamilton BIA supports the location of a VIA passenger station on the northern fringe of the downtown core.

**VIA Commuter Service (Off-peak)**

Of late, it would appear that VIA wishes to effect some integration of its intercity service with regional commuter service. For example, its trains could be used to extend GO Transit rail service into the Niagara Peninsula. GO Transit has hitherto been reluctant to offer commuter rail service beyond Hamilton. The choice of a downtown Hamilton GO Centre – an end-of-line terminal facility – reflects that outlook. Alternative commuter service into the Niagara Peninsula can be provided by GO buses via the QEW, with the option of terminating either in Hamilton or the VIA/GO stations in Aldershot and Burlington for transfer to GO trains. Also, a Go bus originating in the Niagara Peninsula could go all the way, non-stop, between Hamilton and Toronto via Hwy. 403 and the QEW.

Traditionally, VIA (and CN before it) offered a basic service consisting of two pairs of trains operating between Toronto and Niagara Falls. The optimum intercity scheduling involved:

1) An early morning departure from Toronto to Niagara Falls, returning to Toronto with a mid-morning departure out of Niagara Falls;
2) A mid- or late-afternoon departure from Toronto to Niagara Falls, returning to Toronto with an early- or late-evening departure from Niagara Falls.

If provided by VIA, this service level runs diametrically opposite the peak commuter needs for early morning service into the GTO and late afternoon service from the GTO. It can, however, provide a supplementary off-peak rail commuter service. Then again, GO Transit buses, or intercity buses under contract to Go, can provide such a service, if desired, using the QEW.

**VIA Commuter Service (Peak period)**

If VIA were to fully integrate its service into the Niagara Peninsula with GO Transit, it would have to schedule at least one intercity train pair as follows:

1) A late-afternoon or early-evening departure from Toronto to Niagara Falls, with an overnight layover in Niagara Falls, and a return trip to Toronto early the following morning.

This scenario would involve providing 'hotel power' in Niagara Falls unless the locomotive was left to idle all night. It becomes the subject of a cost-benefit analysis on the part of VIA and GO Transit.

In either scenario, en route commuter stops would likely be envisioned along the CN line at St. Catharines, Jordan, Grimsby, and in Hamilton's north end on the fringe of the downtown core. If required, other stops could be added.
The Downtown Hamilton GO Centre

One of Hamilton’s visions was to develop a bedroom community for the GTA within and immediately adjacent to city centre. To that end, the municipality concurred with the choice of a GO Transit terminal in the ex-TH&B station on Hunter Street. GO trains and buses would serve a commuter market that would walk or take public transit (HSR buses) to connect with GO. No long-term commuter parking was developed near the GO Centre, nor was a ‘kiss-and-ride’ facility incorporated into the station itself for drop-off and pick-up. Commuters wishing to utilize personal vehicles were redirected to the VIA/GO Transit station at Waterdown Road in Aldershot. Most commuters originating out of the Niagara Peninsula utilize this option, as do many commuters originating in the GHA—especially above the Niagara Escarpment.

If GO Transit and the HSR cooperate to develop a time-efficient, peak-period, multi-modal service, a growing local ‘downtown’ commuter market should sustain the downtown GO Centre. The one problem affecting future expansion of this facility is the capacity of the Hunter Street tunnel. If GO Transit follows through with its plans to add three more pairs of trains between Toronto and Hamilton, this increase, coupled to current and future projections of CPR freight traffic, may require costly upgrading of the tunnel. At least a portion of improvement costs will be likely be allocated by the railway to GO and, possibly, to the GHA. Thus, future expansion of the GO Centre may be limited.

The Viability of an Ancillary GO Station in the GHA

Another GO station in the GHA should be primarily designed to serve those commuters originating in the GHA’s regional catchment area and within the GTA itself who find it most convenient to ‘park-and-ride’ and ‘kiss-and-ride’. A facility on the lower level of Liuna Station, or in the adjacent Stuart St. rail yards would adequately meet this need if parking for 100 vehicles were initially provided, with a provision for some future expansion.

The most time-efficient access between the north-end GO station and the GHA’s regional catchment area could be adequately affected via the following routes:
1) QEW – Burlington St. (high-level express route) – James St North;
2) Lincoln Alexander Parkway – Red Hill Creek Expressway – QEW – Burlington St. – James St North;
3) Kenilworth Access – Kenilworth Ave. – Burlington St. – James St North;
4) Sherman Cut/Clairmont Access – Victoria Ave./Wellington St. – Cannon St./Burlington St. – James St North.

Because of an exclusively two-way street network running north-south west of Wellington St., time-efficient access is not as appealing either by personal vehicle or public transit; most commuters originating in the western third of the GHA and its regional catchment area will likely avoid this option in favour of funnelling onto Hwy. 403 to/from the Aldershot Via/GO station.

Thus, the Downtown Hamilton BIA favours a second GO station located on the northern fringe of downtown Hamilton. The only downside will be some dilution of
commuters from the GO Centre. Those local commuters now finding themselves closer to the north-end facility will naturally gravitate there, as will many ‘kiss-and-ride’ commuters – especially when the current chaotic congestion on Hunter St. at train times escalates with the addition of three more trains. Indeed, not only could VIA intercity/commuter service operate out of a north-end station, but GO Transit itself may opt to divert some of its future additional trains to this facility.

**A VIA/GO Transit Station in Stoney Creek?**

The Downtown Hamilton BIA wishes to be both fair and realistic in its brief appraisal of the relative merits of locating a VIA/GO station along the CN line in Stoney Creek. Within the broad context of this preliminary and necessarily brief commentary, a Stoney Creek station has merit. Those parts of both the intercity and commuter passenger markets residing in the easternmost portions of the GHA and its regional catchment area will benefit from a shorter trip time to a Stoney Creek facility located with convenient access to/from the Red Hill Creek Expressway and to/from the QEW.

Having pointed this out, the DHBIA hastens to stress that such a station should be regarded as a satellite station to, rather than in lieu of, a station located on the fringe of Hamilton’s downtown core. Although the Downtown Hamilton BIA is not privy to statistical analyses, it intuitively believes that the more centralized facility will adequately serve the GHA’s needs and those of its regional catchment area in the immediate future. However, if and when the population base of the easternmost portions of the GHA’s potential travel market expand enough to merit a separate station, one can be located in Stoney Creek. Thus, the Downtown Hamilton BIA sees this as a future option, and strongly urges VIA, GO Transit and municipal planners to undertake immediately, an exhaustive analysis of the potential intercity and commuter travel markets in the GHA, its surrounding catchment area, and in the Niagara Peninsula.

One might find that the justification for a Stoney Creek station is nearer to hand than one thinks!

**The GHA as a GO Transit Hub?**

The Downtown Hamilton BIA began its commentary by urging the municipality to think bigger – to see itself not merely as ‘Hamilton’ but as the ‘Greater Hamilton Area’, with all that entails. GO Transit’s mandate has always been to funnel commuters into/out of the GTA hub via a network of outreaching spokes.

But, if GO Transit rail commuter service is extended into the Niagara Peninsula – either directly or under contract to VIA, there is sufficient reason to regard the GHA as a secondary hub in its own right. Such a service could easily accommodate commuters living in the Niagara Peninsula who work in the GHA. Alternatively, GO buses could provide the same service, utilizing the GO Centre to feed commuters into/out of Hamilton’s downtown, and the north-end VIA/GO station to funnel commuters into/out of the industrial north end – all in conjunction with efficient HSR transit connections. Admittedly, this market is not that large yet, and competition from personal vehicles using the QEW is stiff for the relatively short distances involved, versus commuting to/from the GTA.
Once again, the market potential needs to be properly assessed via statistical analysis. It is a beginning!

**Conclusion**

The Downtown Hamilton BIA supports a VIA station or a VIA/GO Transit station on the CN line passing through the northern fringe of downtown Hamilton. It also regards a future station location in Stoney Creek as possibly viable if expansion of the GHA and its regional catchment area eastward and southeastward merits a separate, satellite facility. The Downtown Hamilton BIA trusts that above cursory comments will be of some use to the planners of the GHA’s future public transportation network. We would respectfully request an allotment of time on your next committee agenda to present our position.

Respectfully submitted,

Roger Letourneau  
Chairman, Parking and Transportation Committee  
Downtown Hamilton BIA

c.c A. Horwath, MPP  
J. Marsales, MPP  
Hamilton Chamber of Commerce