



Moose Consortium, a group of 12 mostly locally owned businesses, is pushing to build a train route extending as far as Arnprior, Smiths Falls and Alexandria on the Ontario side of the Ottawa River, stretching to Bristol, Wakefield and Montebello in Quebec. ISTOCK

Full steam ahead for Ottawa's privately owned commuter rail

TRANSPORTATION

Line to link six towns via 400 kilometres of extant track

David Sali
Ottawa Business Journal

He might be riding his proposal for a privately backed commuter train into uncharted territory, but that hasn't dampened Joseph Potvin's sense of optimism.

Potvin is director general of Moose Consortium, a group of 12 mostly locally owned businesses pushing to build a train that would link six rural On-

tario and Quebec communities to downtown Ottawa using 400 kilometres of existing track.

No one in this country has launched a railway using nothing but private money in more than a century, a fact the Chelsea-based economist is well aware of. But he believes there's no time like the present to revive such a concept, and he thinks his group has just the plan to do it.

"Every study that has been done in North America and the world on metropolitan-scale passenger rail shows that there are significant property value impacts," Potvin says, explaining that his consortium won't actually build the stations — which would number as many as 50 in the group's long-term plan — itself.

Instead, Moose will turn the

task of developing stations and their surrounding lands over to other private entities.

Potvin is banking that commercial enterprises will want to set up shop near the stations and believes homebuilders will target nearby lands for future development.

Moose would then split profits from any long-term property value gains with its station partners and collect a fee for providing the tracks and trains.

"If there's not enough (development) potential in a location, then there won't be train service there," he says. "It's really quite simple."

Under Moose Consortium's plan, the railway would stretch its tentacles in all directions, extending as far as Arnprior, Smiths Falls and Alexandria on the Ontario side of the Ottawa River while stretching to Bristol, Wakefield and Montebello in Quebec.

Moose would lease the tracks from a host of partners, including the cities of Ottawa and Gatineau, VIA, Canadian Pacific Railway and Canadian

National Railway.

Stations would be built an average of eight kilometres apart, and passengers would travel on double-decker diesel-electric trains that would eventually hook up with Ottawa's light-rail service to deliver commuters downtown.

The group has applied to the Canadian Transportation Agency for a certificate of fitness to allow it to move forward with its plan and hopes to gain the necessary approvals by this fall.

Transport Canada would also have to sign off on the plan, and there are 15 municipal governments who all want a say in a proposal involving trains passing through their boundaries.

Recently, the group presented a plan to spend \$50 million to overhaul the Prince of Wales rail bridge connecting Ottawa to Gatineau. The 135-year-old structure is owned by the City of Ottawa, which would need to approve the retrofit, and technically falls under the jurisdiction of the Canadian Transportation

+ A MAYOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Commuters in Smith Falls will benefit, says Pankow

Smiths Falls Mayor Shawn Pankow supports the project, claiming a commuter train could help attract new residents and commercial development to the town of 9,000.

"We have a large number of people who commute to (Ottawa) for work, and enabling people to

get there quicker, more efficiently, more cost-effectively creates more demand for people to move to our community," he says.

"I think, when we first heard about this a few years ago, it seemed a little bit pie-in-the-sky at the time. They've come a long way to get to where they are today."

Agency because it crosses an interprovincial border.

Potvin concedes that not all municipal politicians the group has spoken with are fully on board with the plan. Some residents who live near the proposed lines have expressed concerns about noise and safety among other issues, he explains.

Ian Lee, a professor at Carleton University's Sprott School of Business, cautions the group still must navigate through more red tape before it reaches

its goal.

He also notes it faces another major hurdle — convincing automobile-loving commuters to ditch their vehicles and hop on the train.

"They're not competing with buses, they're not competing with other trains — this consortium is essentially competing with the automobile," he says.

"The fact remains, the car is overwhelmingly the No. 1 choice of transportation in Canada."

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