

OPINION EDITORIAL

Editorial: Sometimes, privatization is exactly the right track

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The fenced-off Prince of Wales Bridge across the Ottawa River is featured in the Moose Consortium proposal for interprovincial rail service.

“I’m an economist. It bugs me when I see perfectly valuable resources sitting there unused,” Joseph Potvin says. Which explains his brainchild – a company called Moose Consortium – and its vision for a privately financed rail system knitting together small communities in eastern Ontario and western Quebec. This mini-interprovincial rail system would use what are now abandoned rail lines, and be linked by the currently unused Prince of Wales Bridge over the Ottawa River.

Now, we know what you’re thinking: This sounds utterly fanciful. And it may well be. But how refreshing to hear someone other than government talk about a commuter rail network. How refreshing to think that LRT, as important as it is, might not be the only way you could offer practical rail service to people who want to get around the region. Here’s the pitch from Potvin and Moose: a privately financed system with six branch lines that include Bristol, Wakefield and Montebello in Quebec; then Arnprior, Smiths Falls and Alexandria in Ontario. The network would partially repurpose old or abandoned lines. Yes, they do exist.

A group of investors tied to India, Singapore and China says it will offer initial technical expertise and some limited financing to see how solid the proposal truly is. No one is at the stage of a full-blown feasibility study. That’s logical: Who’d rush forward on such a plan without knowing basics such as the state of the old rail, the potential demographic that could be served, what sort of price point would be contemplated, whether local and provincial governments would even endorse or allow it, or whether they’d contribute to infrastructure, such as building a modest train station or refurbishing an old, abandoned one? And would governments be able to reach any working arrangement with a private company over the Prince of Wales Bridge, surely the most expensive part of any plan? What we do like, very much, is the imagination and sheer entrepreneurial gumption involved in thinking up such a plan.

Canadians habitually assume that transportation infrastructure projects can only be planned and financed by governments. The LRT is, of course, an example of this, and everyone looks forward to seeing it operational next year. But not everything has to be government-initiated. Private companies can sometimes accomplish big projects more quickly because they are not as bound by red tape as government is. The profit motive can be a powerful tool for getting things done on time and on budget.

Potvin’s dream includes 400 kilometres of tracks in total, which seems hugely ambitious. Understandably, there is skepticism from analysts. All the same, we hope the money rolls in for that full-scale study. It’ll tell everyone whether rail can thread this region together more tightly. Keep the project on track, at least for a while.