

## **A History of Commuter Railroads in Montreal**

*Joseph Barr*

*Civil engineering graduate,  
Northwestern University*

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### **Introduction**

When people talk about what they call "world class cities", they usually talk

about them as centres of culture, centres of learning or centres of business. But something that is often overlooked when people analyze such cities is the transportation system. Although most people take it for granted, a good transportation network can often be a key element in catapulting a city to greatness: from the Underground of London and the Paris Metro to the trolleys of Switzerland and the German S-Bahns, from METRA in Chicago and the Long Island Rail Road in New York City to the extensive networks of trains and subways found throughout Japan. Even the city of Los Angeles, which has always been car heaven, is in the process of building a comprehensive system of trolleys, subways and commuter rail lines.

Throughout the world, one mark of a truly "world class city" is an efficient public transportation system. And a key element in any such system is commuter rail (or as it is sometimes called, metropolitan rail). From the trademark double-deck cars of Chicago's METRA and Toronto's GO Transit to the numerous services provided by various carriers in the northeastern United States, to the soon to be busy tracks around Los Angeles and Atlanta, North America is dotted with successful transit operations running on existing tracks. But even in the face of such proof that commuter rail can play an integral and successful part in solving the mass transit problems of a city, Montreal soldiers on with only two such lines, one of which is horribly antiquated (although scheduled for renovation over the next four years).

Montreal is a city crisscrossed with railroad tracks, as anyone who has

driven in it can attest, yet only two of those lines carry a regular service for commuters. Of the almost four hundred kilometres of track in the Montreal area, less than one hundred are used for regular commuter service. But it was not always so. Until 1958, Montrealers enjoyed service on six separate commuter lines, and as late as 1980, Montreal was still served by five lines. By the end of that year, CP Rail cut its trains to Farnham and Ste.-Thérèse, and it was down to three lines. Then, in 1988 CN cut its one remaining daily train to St.-Hilaire and Montreal was left with the meager service that it enjoys today. The story of the decline of commuter railroads in Montreal is a sad tale of regulatory ineptness on the part of the federal government, unresponsiveness on the part of the provincial and municipal governments, deception and irresponsible bookkeeping on the part of Canada's national railways, and courageous and sometimes successful protests by the users of the various services. It is my intention in this paper to detail the history of the decline of the commuter railroads of Montreal and to show that if Montreal were to restore the lines that were in use a dozen years ago, it could lay a better claim to the title of world class city. Montrealers are lucky enough to have one of the world's best subway systems, as well as a comprehensive bus network. It has all the components of a world class transit system, except for one: commuter rail. I hope to show where Montreal went wrong and allowed this key element to fall by the wayside, as well as prove that not only can Montreal benefit from a comprehensive commuter rail system, but that it is an essential and extremely important part of any intelligent plan for public

transportation in the Greater Montreal area.

### **Rough Track Ahead: The Beginning of the End**

Until 1958, residents of the communities surrounding Montreal profited from commuter service on six separate lines: from Windsor Station, Canadian Pacific offered service to Dorion and Rigaud in the west, to St.-Jean and Farnham on the South Shore and to Ste.-Thérèse on the North Shore, as well as providing a terminal for New York Central Railroad service from Chateauguy and Valleyfield. Canadian National, for its part, offered service to St.-Hilaire on the South Shore, along with its electrified service to Cartierville, and Deux-Montagnes on the North Shore. Because some of these services were simply regular medium-distance passenger services that happened to provide convenient service for commuters, it is misleading to simply label all of them as commuter lines. This was particularly true of the Chateauguy line, which actually originated in New York State and then continued on to Montreal. But whatever their official designations, these lines carried significant commuter traffic in and around the Montreal region. This was the peak of train service in the Montreal area, with service to almost every sector. (The one notable exception was the East End, which due to the location of Old Montreal and the Port of Montreal didn't enjoy through rail service to downtown Montreal until the coming of the Metro in the 1970's.)

This level of service was not to last, however. In September of 1958, after reducing service a number of times previously, and citing a lack of ridership,

New York Central cut its remaining Canadian services to Windsor Station. Although it is difficult to say exactly how many people were using this service exclusively to commute to Montreal, the 1950's were a time when the automobile was becoming the dominant commuting mode, so it is reasonable to assume that the Chateauguy service had been steadily losing patronage for years before it was terminated. The cuts in service were heavily protested by the municipalities served, and these protests were to continue for many years, as the New York Central fell into deeper and deeper financial difficulty, and eventually merged with its arch-rival, the Pennsylvania Railroad, to form the Penn Central Railroad. The various communities involved continued to request that service be re-established throughout the 1960's and, in 1972, the City of Chateauguy asked the Canadian Transport Commission (CTC) to conduct a survey in view of determining what levels of patronage and/or subsidy would be necessary to support a renewed Penn Central through service to Montreal.

These requests culminated in 1975 when, after a request from Chateauguy's Member of Parliament, Ian Watson, the CTC agreed to consider the possibility of ordering Penn Central to re-establish its commuter service to Montreal. The CTC decided to hold a series of hearings on the subject, listening to testimony from the Penn Central, both of Canada's national railroads (the service would have operated over CP tracks into Windsor Station, but it is unclear why CN representatives were present, aside from their ability to provide a knowledgeable, and possibly unbiased,

opinion) and the regional bus operators, as well as "Le Comité pour le rétablissement du train de banlieue Valleyfield-Chateauguy-Montréal". The former users were requesting that Penn Central establish a service using Budd Rail Diesel Cars (RDCs, which are self-propelled diesel railcars), that would run from Salaberry-de-Valleyfield, through Chateauguy and on into Montreal.

After listening to testimony for two days, the Commission decided that there was not sufficient reason to issue an order forcing Penn Central to provide the requested service. Although the Commission makes no mention of it in its report, it is at the very least ironic that the Penn Central had quite recently handed over a good deal of its U.S. passenger operations to Amtrak, was losing money at an astonishing rate, and would, incredibly, find itself in bankruptcy court in under two years. Even had the CTC required that they re-establish their commuter run, it is doubtful that the Penn Central would have been capable of re-inaugurating such a service, given its incredible financial precariousness. It is even more doubtful that any such service would have survived the tumultuous reorganization that resulted from the Penn Central's insolvency, which saw almost all of that railroad's assets, along with its freight and commuter rail routes, transferred to Conrail, a huge, new government-created railroad.

In any event, nothing further came of those hearings, and the issue lay on the back burner for over a decade, until new plans for a commuter train service to Chateauguy were brought up in the past few years. Although this service cut to the western part of the South Shore

preceded any other cuts by over twenty years, it is mentioned here for two reasons. First, it represents the first stage in the systematic decline of local passenger service into the Montreal area, a process that only recently has begun to show signs of being reversed. Second, the Chateauguay route is the one that has the most immediate promise (as well as need) for re-establishment.

### **Final Boarding Call: Ste. Thérèse and Farnham**

While all this politicking went on in Chateauguay, service continued on the other five lines around Montreal. Both Canada and the United States set up their own publicly-funded railroads (VIA and Amtrak, respectively) to handle the long-distance routes that the private railroads could no longer operate properly, thereby ensuring that long-distance passenger services would continue to roll. Many cities and states in the U.S. took over local commuter train funding, so that these extremely important services could continue to operate without private railroads having to bear the brunt of financial losses. In many cases, such as METRA in Chicago and N.J. Transit and Metro-North in the New York City area, governments not only funded commuter services, but took over their day-to-day operations as well, with varying degrees of success. (A good public agency may well turn out not to know the engine from the caboose.) In 1967, the Government of Ontario created GO Transit, which provided a dedicated source of funding to set up a comprehensive inter-regional commuter transit system in the area surrounding Toronto. They wisely decided to allow CN and CP to continue to do what they

do best, that is, run the trains, and at this point in time, the GO trains can definitely be called a complete success.

In Montreal, however, the various levels of government seemed happy to let CN and CP continue to run commuter services as they saw fit, seemingly confident in the knowledge that passenger train services were expressly protected in the clauses of the British North America Act which had provided for a government-funded transcontinental railroad. That constitution provided protection for all routes that were classified as "passenger-train service", such that a railroad would have to receive federal permission if it wished to greatly modify or abandon service on a particular route. And for many years, this was sufficient to keep commuter services operating in the Montreal area. Both railways reduced certain services to the bare minimum, but they were not allowed to completely abandon them without permission from the government, permission which was not readily forthcoming, as the CTC's 1976 rejection of a CP abandonment request on the Farnham and Ste.-Thérèse lines illustrates. But in 1980, that protection came to an end, as the Commission decided that the various local lines in and around Montreal were not "passenger-train services" (implying that they carried traffic that was not strictly local in nature), but were in fact commuter trains, and no longer covered by the BNA Act. The Canadian government claimed that it had declassified the line in the hope that it would allow the Quebec government to more easily incorporate it into an overall transit plan for the Montreal area. But in view of the fact that Quebec City had

announced a long-range transit plan a year earlier, the sincerity of that hope can easily be called into question.

The results of this decision were clear, though. The door was opened to CP, which within months started to seriously threaten to shut down service to both Farnham and Ste.-Thérèse, destinations to which they were at this point only operating one train a day in each direction on each line. They also began to consider the future of their more successful but still money-losing Lakeshore (Dorion-Rigaud) service. Meanwhile, CN began to make rumblings concerning its two services, and the decline of commuter train service in Montreal began in earnest. In September 1980, CP announced that as of October 24, it would no longer offer daily passenger services on its lines between Windsor Station and Ste.-Thérèse, and Windsor Station and Farnham. With this decision, along with the rerouting a few years earlier of a Montreal-St.-John, N.B. long-distance train, St.-Jean-sur-Richelieu, which had been the departure point for the first scheduled passenger service in Canada, was left without any form of passenger service (although both of Amtrak's trains to Montreal now pass through St.-Jean without stopping on the perpendicular CN tracks).

The cessation of service was strongly protested by the remaining users, particularly on the Farnham line, who were losing their only direct transit link to Montreal. (Getting to Montreal without a car would now involve a complicated series of maneuvers that would still leave the user only at the Longueuil Metro.) Commuters were faced with the choice of either using a car, or moving

closer to Montreal. For those who used the train to get to school, or to go shopping or visit friends in Montreal, there was practically no workable solution. Unfortunately, CP had raised fares so high and reduced service to such a degree that by the end, there were fewer than one hundred daily users, so that the protests, though deeply felt by each displaced user, were still quite small, and the service was allowed to die. Although a committee of users was formed, and in cooperation with Transport 2000 Quebec attempted to appeal the CTC's reclassification of the various lines, their efforts were unsuccessful, and CP was allowed to abandon service without having to seek government permission.

There are many reasons why CP decided to abandon its Ste.-Thérèse and Farnham routes. The main reason was that they were highly unprofitable routes, and they could now discontinue them without having to go through the harrowing and probably unsuccessful process of getting public approval. CP estimated that it had lost over \$650,000 on these routes over the last year, and that these deficits would continue to go up in the future. Although these numbers are misleading, since CP (and CN, for that matter) had a nasty habit of charging all costs for track maintenance to their passenger services, even though heavy freight operations cause most of the damage, it is still true that these routes were definitely unprofitable, given the low ridership figures. But it is in examining these low ridership figures that the real reasons for the abandonment can be found. In the years leading up to the abandonment, CP had raised fares on these routes to the point where it had become more expensive to

ride from Farnham to Montreal than to travel from Montreal to Ottawa. Although CP was simply attempting to make a profit, these unreasonably high fares made it tempting to stop using the train, especially as the Quebec government continued to build subsidized highways in and around Montreal. So each time that CP raised fares, fewer people would continue to use their lines, and in the end, they were able to justify closing the line, since hardly anyone was using it, even taking the highest estimates (which ranged up to 130 passengers per day). In the days leading up to the cuts in service, the Minister of Transport attempted to force CP to continue the service, in return for which it would begin talks about funding the service. But CP refused, saying the offer was too little, too late, and the services were cut, leaving Montreal with only three commuter train lines.

### **Clear Track Ahead: Progress in Rigaud**

In many ways 1980 was the lowest point in the history of commuter trains in Montreal. Not only was Montreal down to three lines, but both the Rigaud and St.-Hilaire lines were down to a couple of trains each day in each direction, while the Two-Mountains line was running a train every ninety minutes outside of rush hour, down from the two trains an hour that had run previously. At this point, the Quebec government seemed to realize that they could no longer ignore this sorry condition, and things actually started to happen. This was partially due to a realization on the government's part that unrestrained highway development could cause a number of problems, but also due to growing pressure from users' groups on the Rigaud and Two-Mountains line,

who objected to cuts in service and threats of abandonment. Although the Farnham and Ste.-Thérèse lines also had users' groups, they were smaller and less vocal and, therefore, much less effective. As well, the two "West Island" lines ran through richer and more politically powerful areas of Montreal, so when they complained, Quebec listened.

In April 1981, the federal government was convinced to earmark \$70 million for renovations to the three existing commuter lines, with CN agreeing to kick in \$10 million towards the Two-Mountains line. Of that \$70 million, \$17.5 million was to go the St.-Hilaire line, \$17.5 million to the Rigaud line, and \$35 million to the Two-Mountains line (plus the \$10 million from CN). At the same time, the Quebec Government responded to CP's threat to close the Rigaud line in May 1982 by commencing negotiations with both CN and CP to work out a deal to finance their commuter operations, as well as to better integrate them into the MUCTC (Montreal Urban Community Transit Corporation) bus and Metro system. The Department of Transport also came up with a long-term plan for public transportation in the Montreal area, which included upgrading the Rigaud and St.-Hilaire lines and building so-called Surface Metros (steel-wheeled subways, as are used throughout the world) to Two-Mountains, Laval and Repentigny, over existing railroad rights-of-way, as well as integrating the fares into a regional zone system. This proposal took the form of a glossy insert in Montreal papers, detailing it in bright colours with full-page maps. Although much was made of this plan in the media, nothing ever came of it, but it at

least showed that the Quebec Government was thinking about the transportation problems of Montreal, and considered a commuter train network as a vital element in any possible solution.

As is always the case, what was finally done was a good deal less ambitious (and costly) than what had originally been proposed, but it did result in significant ridership increases in service frequency, and a direct transfer at the Vendôme Metro station, as well as numerous smaller improvements. In the end, it appears that, of the money allocated for all three remaining lines, almost all was spent on the Rigaud line. In any event, the renovations, which were started in 1983, and were not finished until 1989, eventually wound up costing approximately \$100 million, and were marred by shoddy materials (station shelters that started to rust after six months) and incompetence on the part of the contractors. But the line immediately began to show improved ridership, and by September 1983, there were 7000 riders per day, a steady increase from the low of 3400 per day in 1981. (The line had seen a high of 15,000 riders per day, in 1966.)

Ridership has continued to increase since then, especially since the arrival of twenty-four new cars from Bombardier to handle the increases. The main reason for these increases, aside from improvements to the infrastructure, was the integration into the MUCTC fare system. Instead of having to pay the unreasonably high fares charged by CP, and find themselves on the edge of the downtown, commuters could now pay a more reasonable fare (subsidized by the provincial government), although even

the lowest fares were still more expensive than regular bus fare, and the fares from the more distant towns like Rigaud and Dorion remained fairly high. But riders were now offered full transfer privileges onto the MUCTC bus and Metro system, and combined with the new direct transfer at the Vendôme Metro station, the train now offered a number of attractive features, so, that more and more people were convinced to leave their cars at home (or at least at the park-and-ride lot), and take the train. The Rigaud line modernization can, almost ten years after it started, be called a nearly complete success, as well as proof that when commuters are given an efficient, reliable, reasonably-priced commuter train, they will use it.

### **Stuck in Station: Frustration in Two-Mountains**

Things did not go as smoothly on the Two-Mountains line, however. Fares were integrated into the MUCTC system in much the same manner as on the Rigaud line, and service was restored to one train every hour off-peak, with numerous trains during rush hour. But the badly needed modernization was a completely different story. When CN signed a joint operation contract with the Quebec government and the MUCTC in July 1982, it was a ten-year contract, and it was definitely non-renewable, for two reasons. First, the government was then claiming that complete renovation lay in the very near future, and second, CN made it clear that there was no way that they could continue to operate any type of reliable, safe service past 1992, without new equipment and infrastructure. At the time, it was inconceivable that renovations would not be complete by 1992, and this agreement seemed to be perfectly

reasonable. Some of the equipment in use dated back to the original opening of the tunnel over sixty years earlier, and even the newest cars had gone into service in the 1950's. But in spite of this obviously pressing need for renewal, all the parties involved began to drag their feet on the issue. Although everyone seemed quite willing to spend money on studies, getting money to actually accomplish any work was next to impossible. The \$35 million originally allocated in 1981 was woefully inadequate for a full renewal, even had it not been spent elsewhere.

The next major plan was a comprehensive study, released in 1985, that was commissioned by the Montreal Urban Community (MUC). This provided a preliminary plan for complete renovations, including new cars, new track, new signalling, and a new maintenance base. It also included a section on the possibility of servicing Mirabel airport via the Two-Mountains line. All in all, it would have cost almost \$160 million, which was a more realistic cost, considering the magnitude of the project. But buried in the report was a letter from the City of Montreal, opposing the modernization on the grounds that it would serve very few people in the city proper. Since the City of Montreal holds a majority in the MUC council, it was able to successfully block the report, and prevent much further progress on the issue. But that report had provided a fairly complete plan, and had planted the seed that would eventually lead to progress even if it were to come at a snail's pace.

Early on in the fight to save the Two-Mountains line, the regular users had, along with Transport 2000 Quebec,

formed a train users committee, and they kept the issue alive, by distributing flyers and writing to the various politicians involved. It is quite amazing that they persevered in the face of the almost constant deception on the part of government. In 1988, the Quebec government appeared to have answered their wishes, setting aside \$175 million for a complete renovation of the line. This plan (which consisted of a paragraph in a ten year plan for transportation in the Montreal area) appears to have conserved the main elements of the 1985 plan, except for the requisite price increase. This proposal came after a slew of studies, among which was a report by the consulting firm Transurb, which showed that abandoning the line and replacing it with express buses (which is what the City of Montreal wanted) would increase highway congestion considerably, since at least half of the commuters would likely switch to using their cars. This was one in a long series of such studies, on which over \$7 million had been spent since 1964. Almost all of those studies showed that some sort of modernization was absolutely necessary, and it appeared that the government was finally prepared to heed that recommendation. But it was not to be: although the government was more than willing to pay for major projects like rebuilding Montreal area highways, the rail portions of the plan were forgotten, without any explanations.

The actual service offered continued to go downhill, and in 1989, it became necessary for CN to remove a number of train sets that had become unserviceable. At this point, most of the parts used by the trains were no longer manufactured, and the CN mechanics

were making them themselves. Considering the state of the equipment, it is a credit to them that the trains continued to run, with a 95% on-time performance. The removal of those train sets necessitated cutting 25% of the runs, and off-peak service was cut to one train every two hours, when it had formerly been an hourly service. It was then, at possibly the lowest point in the history of the line, that the Quebec government finally made a financial commitment to repairing the line. It gave CN \$1 million to repair the train sets, which allowed the MUCTC to restore the previous level of service. After that point, things began to look up for the line. The newly appointed Minister of Transport, Sam Elkas, who had dealt with the Rigaud line modernization while mayor of Kirkland, was in favour of rail transportation for urban areas. The next year, the Department of Transport leased a number of cars from VIA Rail that had been mothballed after the cuts made to that agency. Those cars were put in service on the locomotive-hauled runs, replacing the oldest rolling stock in use on the line. Although there were problems with the cars (not enough doors, fewer seats), they demonstrated the government's willingness to actually spend money on the line, as opposed to piles of studies.

Finally, after months of wrangling at various levels of government, on February 12, 1992, the announcement came. The Department of Transport was ready to spend \$250 million to completely renovate and replace all elements of the Two-Mountains line. After years of broken promises, for the first time, a contract was actually signed, for the purchase of 58 new multiple unit cars from Bombardier at a total cost of

\$125 million. The plan, which was quite similar to the one released in 1985, also called for completed renewal of all other elements of the line, including the track, the catenary power supply and power stations, as well as completely new stations. A new garage and maintenance base is to be built in the Two-Mountains area, along with a new test track. One key element will be the construction of "regional" stations, which will provide park-and-ride facilities for commuters arriving on autoroutes 15, 13 and 640. The Quebec government had obviously realized the importance of the Two-Mountains rail line in the transportation infrastructure of the Montreal area, and chose to follow the course that experts had been pointing them towards for years. Although service cuts took effect in the summer of 1992, these were necessary to allow the trains to continue to operate until the new rolling stock can be put into service. Amazingly enough, CN managed to continue operations even past the July 1992 deadline, which would have seemed like fantasy had it been suggested ten years earlier. CN's workers must be praised for their superhuman efforts that kept the trains rolling, since most people would have given up on the line as being impossibly antiquated and unserviceable. Although the work has yet to begin in earnest, and it is still possible that the modernization might not take place, the signing of the Bombardier contract seems to indicate that Canada's only electrified passenger rail line will continue to operate long into the future.

### **Bridge Out: St.-Hilaire**

The final line in the Montreal area was the St.-Hilaire line, operated by CN. Leaving from Central Station, it crossed

the Victoria Bridge to St.-Lambert, and continued over the CN right-of-way to St.-Hilaire. It followed the pattern of the other diesel lines, being reduced to a one train a day in each direction, and losing thousands of riders. In 1983, there were approximately 600 passengers per day. By the time service ended in 1988, that figure had fallen to fewer than 300, many of who were CN employees who rode free or at reduced fare. CN claimed to be running a yearly deficit of \$1.3 million at the time, and they refused to continue to operate it without a subsidy. It is surprising that the line actually lasted that long, but had it not been for the inability of the mayors of the communities involved to agree, the line might still be operating today.

While the Two-Mountains and Rigaud lines were saved by their integration into the MUCTC system, the route of the St.-Hilaire line lay mainly outside of the MUC, and was therefore not considered for such an agreement. However, the users made repeated attempts to get the mayors of the communities through which the trains passed, as well as the Montreal South Shore Transit Corporation (MSSTC), to agree to a method of financing train operation. Although \$17.5 million was allocated to the line in 1981 by the provincial government, that money was never spent, and would likely have been insufficient to do the necessary work. The Quebec Government's 1988-1998 transit plan set aside almost \$200 million for the line, but as was the case with the Two-Mountains line, that money was never spent.

The major problem in saving the line was the fact that it passed through a number of different small communities,

and they were unable to come together and agree on a stable source of funding, or even whether they wanted to save the service at all. Because of this, the government was unwilling to enter into any long-term agreement to finance the line, since the municipalities would not have been able to make any major contributions, and they could not be sure whether the service would actually be used. Those municipalities went as far as forming the Richelieu Valley CIT (Commission Intermunicipal de Transport), but in the end, that resulted only in better bus service, not improved train service. To add to the problem, the MSSTC appeared to oppose the service also, preferring to operate more buses on the reserved lane of the Champlain Bridge (the roadway of the Victoria Bridge is structurally incapable of carrying buses). The Department of Transport made a last ditch attempt to save the line right before it was closed, but it asked the cities along the route to make a financial contribution. They were unable to agree (once again) to give any money, and faced with this ambivalence, the government chose not to follow through with its effort, and the line was left to die.

There were, of course, many studies made on the line. The Quebec Government claimed in 1988 that it was going to cost almost \$200 million to renovate the line. But this was a gold-plated plan, which would have involved adding a dedicated third track the entire length of the line as well as having ten-minute headways during rush hour. Since ridership estimates hovered around 10,000, it seems unlikely that such a high level of service would really have been necessary. CN estimated that it could perform the necessary work

for \$100 million, and their estimate seems more realistic. In 1990, the CN subsidiary CANAC estimated that a less extensive route that went only as far as St.-Bruno could be put in service for a little as \$50 million, and in 1989, a joint CANAC/Peat Marwick study had reported that such a line could be operated at an annual cost of \$2 million. In 1992, the MSSTC commissioned a new study on the subject, but the results were not available as this was being written. Although the St.-Hilaire line has been put on hold temporarily, it appears that interest in the line still remains. Since this alignment is already served by both VIA and Amtrak long-distance trains, it would seem possible to re-establish commuter service. Hopefully, any new commuter rail plan would include a St.-Hilaire line, and it seems likely that the Victoria Bridge has not seen its last commuter train.

### **Summer Excursions: Two Temporary Lines**

Two other temporary lines deserve mention here, if only as demonstrations of the Quebec government's apparently renewed belief in the viability of rail transit. Both lines were put in place during the summer of 1990, one planned, one unplanned. During the reconstruction of the Metropolitan expressway, the Department of Transport rented a number of cars and locomotives from VIA, and began operating three daily round-trips from Repentigny to the Du College Metro, roughly paralleling the expressway, starting May 15th.

Newspaper reports do not agree on whether the service was entirely successful, with some claiming daily ridership as high as 5000, others going

as low as 500. It appears that the trains were full initially, but ridership fell after the expected delays on the Metropolitan did not materialize. Since the line did not go near downtown, and riders then had to pay a Metro fare to get anywhere, it is easy to see why the service was not as popular as it might have been. Unfortunately, the trains operated over CN tracks, and their diesel engines could not use the Mount-Royal tunnel, the only direct access to downtown. There was once an electrified branch of the Two-Mountains line that served part of that route (parts of the catenary are still visible at the junction of the two lines), but this could not be put back into service. The line was discontinued on October 12, although there were calls for it to be made permanent, which fell on deaf ears. But even if it did nothing else, the line demonstrated the feasibility of a line to Pointe-aux-Trembles and Repentigny.

The other line was put in service to carry commuters during the Mercier bridge blockades that took place during the Oka crisis of that summer. Although the standoff had an overall bad effect on commuter train service, since it put plans for a new line to Chateauguay on hold, and slowed down progress on the Two-Mountains line modernization, it did give rise to this temporary service. Starting in St.-Isidore, near Chateauguay, it followed a circuitous route through Brossard and over the Victoria Bridge into Central Station (since the rail crossing next to the Mercier bridge was also blocked). The beleaguered commuters, however, loved the line (which was free), and the trains were full almost from day one. As soon as the bridge was reopened, most people returned to their cars, but a

significant number continued to use the single daily train in each direction. The government finally discontinued the service on August 26, but it also demonstrated that a properly marketed line to Chateaugay could be successful, especially if it used the much more direct line to Windsor Station. Although neither of these trains had any permanent effect on commuting patterns, they both demonstrated that expansions to the existing commuter rail lines are feasible, and given a chance and good planning, they could be very successful.

### **Yellow Signal: Expansion Possibilities**

The future of commuter rail in the Montreal area is fairly murky right now. The renovations made to the Rigaud line ensure its continued operation, and barring a major reversal on the part of the government, the future of the Two-Mountains line also looks good. The only possible problem lurking on the horizon is the possibility that, after it finishes paying for the Two-Mountains line modernization, the Quebec government may begin to reduce its subsidies to the train operations. But as for expansion of the system, there are many mixed signals coming from various sources. There have been discussions and studies concerning restoring service to the Chateaugay line for years. In the summer of 1990, it appeared that the communities in the area were getting close to starting up a basic service. But with the standoff with the Mohawks, all those plans went out the window, since over half of the line would have been on their territory. With tensions still being felt in that area, it appears that the project has been put on hold indefinitely.

The next commuter train development came on February 6, 1992, just days before the announcements concerning the Two-Mountains line, when CP Rail unveiled a plan intended to at least double the number of commuter rail lines in the Montreal area. The plan called for the creation of a new CP subsidiary, BMI (Bonjour Montreal Inc.) that would start operating commuter trains over the two lines abandoned by CP in 1980. The South Shore line would start in Iberville (across the river from St.-Jean), not Farnham, while the Laval route would continue past Ste.-Thérèse to St.-Jérôme, and would have a branch to Mascouche. CP would operate these services over its existing tracks, into Windsor Station, using either Budd RDCs, or a conventional push-pull locomotive-and-trailer system. There was a possibility of starting services using a number of used GO Transit cars that were then available fairly cheap, but those cars were then sold to Lima, Peru, for \$5.5 million. The newspaper *La Presse* indicated on June 19, 1992 that the Quebec government had an option to buy the cars, but that was not enough to stop their sale elsewhere. CP also professed itself willing to take over operation of the two existing lines, as well as to begin operations over CN tracks to St.-Hilaire/Brossard on the South Shore and Repentigny in the east, in addition to Chateaugay over Conrail tracks.

CN's response was that it had no desire to turn over its commuter operations to CP, and that if any new services were to be operated over its tracks, they would be operated by CN, or possibly the MUCTC. The MUCTC, for its part, appeared to favour the plan, since this

would allow it to hand over day-to-day commuter rail operations to another agency, something that it had been attempting to do anyway. The fact that the provincial government took out an option on the Toronto GO cars seems to be proof that they too supported the plan. CP, of course, was expecting to receive a subsidy to operate the trains so it seems safe to assume that they had found their financial arrangements with the government concerning the Rigaud line to have been fairly profitable (CN's defensiveness concerning lines on its tracks appears to support this conjecture). The plan most experts gave it their support. But although CP unveiled it with much fanfare, and there was good media coverage, it appeared to be headed nowhere.

Then, in June 1992, the *Montreal Gazette* reported that Conseil Métropolitain de Transport en Commun (CMTC), the regional body that coordinated the activities of the MUCTC, MSSTC and the Société de Transport de Laval (STL), had reached an "agreement in principle" to provide commuter rail service on four new lines. The lines, all radiating from downtown Montreal, would go to St.-Jérôme, Mascouche and St.-Jean/Iberville (the lines that the BMI plan had proposed), as well as to Chateauguay. Although the article (which was one paragraph long) didn't mention who the agreement had been reached with, it seems reasonable that it would have been with CP, since these lines would all operate wholly or partly over CP tracks, without touching CN's tracks. It was claimed that these lines would go into service in 1993, but there has been no mention of them since that paragraph, and at this writing, it is unclear what will come of this

supposed agreement. So although the possibility of expansions to the commuter train lines exists, nothing is certain right now. But people in high places seem to at least realize that commuter trains exist, and developments could take place at any time.

### **All Aboard: A Vision for the Future**

At this point, after reviewing the hard facts, it seems appropriate to indulge in some fantasy. What will follow is what this writer feels should be done to revitalize commuter train service in the Montreal area, which is home to almost three million people. This fantasy assumes a number of things, not all of which are necessarily true. First, that the Quebec government is willing to devote large amounts of money to commuter rail (as it has been with road construction and repair). Second, that all the communities around Montreal (not just Laval and the South Shore, but all the peripheral ones as well) support commuter rail and are willing to make the financial contributions necessary to run the trains. Third, that it is possible to convince CN, CP and Conrail to adjust their freight train operations to allow for the passage of commuter trains. And most importantly, I am assuming that there exist commuters who are willing to abandon their cars for efficient, reliable trains. Based on the evidence of the two commuter lines that remain intact, as well as the very existence of the CP plan, it would seem that those last two conditions are satisfied.

The solution to the second condition lies in the first step of this plan. The Quebec government should start by either expanding the CMTC, or creating a new regional body that would have

jurisdiction over all public transportation in the Greater Montreal area. Not only would it represent the MUC, Laval and the immediate South Shore, but also all the peripheral communities that have started their own CITs. Such an agency would allow a much better coordination between the various agencies, a pooling of assets to allow more ambitious projects, and would present a united, more powerful front to various levels of government. But most importantly, such an agency could coordinate a zonal fare system, so that riders' fares would be based solely on where they were riding from, not what route they chose, without having to worry about a different fare system, or incompatible transfers. The separate systems would maintain their autonomy operationally, but to the user, their fare systems would appear transparent, and a rider from Chateauguay could transfer easily to MUCTC buses to complete his journey. This agency should also, with the permission of the communities involved, be given the tools necessary to fund transit, both for day-to-day operations and for capital programs. This could take the form of some sort of gas tax, or new tolls on the bridges. Tolls have been very successful in New York City, and they have the advantage not only of raising money, but discouraging people from driving. (Although such tactics may seem somewhat mercenary, it seems unfair that drivers get to use the roads for free, while transit users continue to dutifully pay their fares.) Only the provincial government has the political power necessary to set up such an agency, and it would also ease provincial contributions to transit funding.

There have historically been problems

with the operations of such super-agencies (the RTA in Chicago continue to face the dilemmas of a profitable commuter-rail operation, a money-losing metro system, and the infighting that has resulted). But the MTA in New York has done a fairly good job of coordinating the services and financial allocations (although not the fares) of the various transit services in and around New York City. And one has only to study the Zürcher Verkehrsverbund in Zurich, Switzerland, to see a completely fare-integrated system that is successful and provides unparalleled service to its users. By integrating the fares and operations of every transit operation (trains, trolleys, buses, boats, even cable-car lines) in the Zurich area, almost every commuter is provided with a reasonably priced, convenient alternative to the car. There are important differences between Montreal and Zurich, most importantly Montreal's greater population and urban sprawl. But given the higher level of service offered in Zurich, it seems that the actual complexities of the systems are roughly comparable. London Transport has managed to integrate its fares over a very wide service area, although the British Rail commuter trains run on a separate system. So although it would be fairly complicated to put in place and operate an integrated fare zone system in the Montreal area, the benefits in terms of ease of use and attractiveness to potential riders would almost certainly make it worth the effort. Although it might require large changes in the way Montreal transit agencies do business, it would be the largest-scale integration in North America, and would almost certainly attract new riders.

Once such an agency is created,

though, the rest will fall into place. Routes that are duplicated by separate agencies can be eliminated, and more efficient and direct service can be provided to distant destinations. And the real advantage will come when setting up new commuter rail lines, which will become the trunk routes to the suburbs. Once all the regional transportation authorities are united under one agency, it will be possible to eliminate the fare inequities that exist today, where stations within one kilometre of each other can have large fare disparities, because one station lies within the CMTC, while the other one is outside. Since all the communities involved will be paying towards providing public transportation, fares will be more reasonable than the current unsubsidized \$6.00 one-way fare to Two-Mountains.

After sifting through the history of commuter rail in Montreal, a number of new routes that should be considered for service become apparent. Since both major rail terminals in Montreal are currently served by commuter rail, it is simply a matter of expanding from there. The important thing would be that although the new super-agency would coordinate the train service, it would leave CN and CP to operate them, since that is what they do best. Although CP's BMI plan had it becoming the sole operator, it seems somewhat strange to have CP operating CN's trains, since CN is perfectly capable of doing so itself. It is also important that proposed routings be thoroughly studied first (although not quite as thoroughly as the Two-Mountains line), to ensure that there is actually a demand for commuter rail service. Nothing can hurt public transportation's credibility faster than not

having anyone use it. What follows is list of the lines that I feel should be studied.

### **Windsor Station Services (CP Rail)**

The most obvious new routes are the ones proposed in the CP/BMI plan, that is, to St.-Jérôme and Mascouche, and to St.-Jean/Iberville, via the rail crossing parallel to the Mercier Bridge. This would restore CP service to the level offered a dozen years ago, and CP is obviously quite ready to develop and operate such a service. It would restore passenger service to the site of the country's first scheduled train line, as well as providing Laval, Quebec's second largest city, with rail service (without a costly Metro extension). The Laval lines would also stop at the disused Jean-Talon station (which is a beautiful building), and provide a direct transfer to the Parc Metro station. Since CP appears to have already studied these two lines in depth, they could probably be put in service quite quickly. The other line that should be studied for service is the one to Chateauguay, which would require permission from Conrail as well. Once again, this line has been the subject of studies for many years, and the need for such a line appears to have been demonstrated fairly well.

CP's lines also provide the possibility of serving both of Montreal's airports, and they could be the subjects of more long-range studies with this in mind. The Rigaud line's Dorval station is within sight of Dorval airport, and it would probably not be prohibitively expensive to build a branch to the airport. Although the Two-Mountains line is most often mentioned in relation to Mirabel airport, the line to St.-Jérôme also passes fairly close, and connecting it to Mirabel

would not require a tunnel underneath the runways.

Since only Rigaud trains currently use Windsor Station, it is a perfect place for new lines to terminate. Any such expansion plans must be reconciled with construction plans for the new Forum, which currently show the tracks, which already terminate a fair distance from the station building, being cut back even farther, to the far side of the Forum, near the Lucien-L'Allier Metro stop. Perhaps the opportunity should instead be taken to place the tracks underneath the Forum, allowing the platforms to be located closer to the station (and the main downtown core) than they are presently.

#### **Central Station Services (CN Rail)**

The most obvious line to be considered for study is one to the South Shore. Crossing the Victoria Bridge, such a line could proceed to a variety of destinations. Service could initially be restored on the St.-Hilaire corridor, since that route has been the subject of a number of studies, and the viability of a line has been demonstrated in those studies. But the CP/BMI plan also mentions the possibility of the line branching west to Brossard and east to Verchères. These lines would have to be the subject of studies, since their viability has not been ascertained. Service to St.-Jean could also be provided along this route, although it would mean more trains on the relatively busy Victoria Bridge, while the Chateauguay crossing is under-used. At the very least, a line could be operated to St.-Lambert, directly across the St.-Lawrence from Montreal, where a park-and-ride lot and bus exchange could be built (to provide service similar to that

offered by the Longueuil branch of the Metro). This would also allow people to be diverted from the Champlain bridge bus-lane, whose safety has come into question repeatedly. This service could likely be set up fairly quickly, since it could be done with diesel trains, which don't require the overhead power lines used by the Two-Mountains line.

The other line to consider would be one to Repentigny, via the Mount-Royal tunnel. Such a service would have to be electrified, and might take a little while to set up, assuming studies show there to be a need for it. (It might actually be possible to route it through to the CP tracks that would be used by the Laval trains, and into Windsor Station on diesel power.) This line might replace possible extensions to Metro Line 5, as well as shorten the route of the proposed Line 7. Studies could also be undertaken concerning the possibility of providing service to Mirabel airport, which badly needs it (the 1985 Two-Mountains study includes a section on this). Although long-distance trains use Central Station, and there would therefore be restrictions on commuter train movements, it is located closer to the present downtown core, and has direct access to the north via the Mount-Royal tunnel, avoiding the ride around the mountain that would inconvenience Windsor Station trains. (The downside of using the tunnel would be the need to use electric trains).

#### **For Further Study**

The operators of any commuter rail service in the Montreal area should consider the long-term possibility of electrifying its lines. Although the northeastern United States is the only area of North America where the

majority of the trains are operated on electric power, there are some major advantages to doing so, particularly in Quebec. First, electric lines can operate multiple-unit trains, where each car is powered by a relatively small motor, and there is no large locomotive. Although there is little difference between operating multiple-unit cars and locomotive-hauled trains during rush hour, during the rest of the day, it is possible to operate shorter trains without having to devote a large locomotive to the run. This translates into a greater frequency of service during the off-peak of multiple-unit trains as opposed to locomotive trains. One has only to look at the difference between the Two-Mountains line (multiple unit operation, off-peak service every hour), and the Rigaud line (locomotive hauled operation, off-peak service approximately every three hours) to see the difference between the two types of service. Second, Quebec has an abundance of cheap electricity, and no oil reserves, so it makes a good deal more sense for Montreal to run electric trains (since it will allow the trains to operate more cheaply). And since hydroelectricity is generally non-polluting and completely renewable, it is environmentally friendlier to run electric trains as opposed to diesel ones. There are economic disadvantages to electric trains, which stem from the need to erect and maintain the overhead power supply, and the fact that it might be difficult to string the overhead wires across the lift bridges used to cross the St. Lawrence Seaway. But these are outweighed by the advantages, and it would certainly be worthwhile to conduct studies on the economics and feasibility of a long-term switch to electrically-powered trains.

## **Conclusion**

The Montreal area suffers due to its lack of adequate commuter train service. According to *La Presse* of January 16, 1984, a 10% drop in South Shore house prices was linked directly to the lack of good train service. Every year, Montrealers lose millions of hours of productivity while stuck in traffic jams, when they could be catching up on work, reading, or even sleep, while riding the train. The quality of life of Montreal residents is lowered by the noise and air pollution caused by cars travelling back and forth to work each day. Since World War II, Montreal has lost over 23,000 housing spaces, and the taxes that go along with them, to uncontrolled highway construction. People move out to the suburbs looking for peace and quiet, and find that the traffic congestion follows them there as well. These are all problems that could be curbed or avoided with effective commuter train service.

While the Ontario economy is heavily dependent on the automobile, Quebec's derives little benefit from cars, whereas Bombardier, a major commuter rail rolling-stock manufacturer, is a large employer, and SNC-Lavalin does consulting work for public transportation agencies around the world. Quebec has vast reserves of electricity that could operate electric trains, but instead we continue to base our transportation on oil, a non-renewable resource. In today's increasingly mobile society, the importance of a region's ability to transport people efficiently cannot be overstated. Cars have consistently been shown to be an inefficient transportation method, whereas trains are efficient.

Montreal possesses a large underground city, which links both major downtown train stations, and is expanding constantly. The MSSTC has just opened a state of the art downtown bus terminal in the basement of the new 1000 de La Gauchetière building, which also provides a more direct link between Central Station, the Bonaventure Metro (Line 2) and Windsor Station. Construction continues on an underground passage from Place Ville-Marie to the Eaton Centre, which will also directly connect Central Station to the McGill Metro (Line 1), and the MUCTC has just opened new bus lanes that allow buses to come closer to the downtown via René-Lévesque Boulevard. All these developments have turned the areas around Central and Windsor stations into a large interchange station for all forms of Montreal area public transportation, and it seems only natural that the next step would be to introduce commuter trains into the mix, allowing for even greater transfer possibilities. Montreal, in fact, has all the elements of an efficient transportation system, except for one, and it is time to fill that gap. The government owes its citizens the right to a safe, fast, efficient, comfortable, clean, convenient and affordable transportation system, criteria which are perfectly satisfied by a good commuter rail system. Commuter rail makes sense for Montreal, and the time is right to start putting the pieces together. To quote from the CP/BMI plan: "Il ne faut pas rater le train!"

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Au cours de l'été 1992, Transport 2000 Québec a réalisé une recherche sur l'historique des trains de banlieue dans

la région de Montréal. Ce travail a été effectué par monsieur Joseph Barr, résident de Ville Mont-Royal. Monsieur Barr était étudiant en génie civil, option transport, à l'Université Northwestern de Chicago.