



Mr. Mario Pélouin
President and CEO
VIA Rail Canada
3 Place Ville-Marie, Suite 500
Montréal, QC H3B 5M1

29 February 2024

Dear Mario Pélouin,

Winnipeg-Churchill Service Quality

The Winnipeg-Churchill route provides an essential service to many communities in northern Manitoba without road access, as well as connectivity for communities further south that have no alternative public transport. These trains also serve as one of Canada's major eco-tourism destinations, bringing passengers whose spending is vital to northern and Indigenous businesses. VIA Rail has made significant efforts to promote this route, including the Expedition Churchill collaboration in 2018.

As advocates for passengers and sustainable public transport, we are therefore concerned by the increasing number of comments we are receiving about the service, particularly the limitations of current menu, which necessitates passengers in both economy and sleeper class to pack their own food for the multi-day trip.

VIA Rail is to be commended for keeping this service operating throughout the pandemic, but the quality of service has yet to return to that provided before 2020, deterring ridership and the tourist revenue to help offset the costs of the essential service. We ask that VIA Rail move quickly to address this issue, including:

- Reinstating a chef position to provide freshly prepared meals that showcase regional cuisine.
- Operating more sleeper capacity per train for tour groups and independent travellers.
- Extending the third round-trip south to Canora, Dauphin, Portage, and Winnipeg.

The food service situation should be resolved swiftly, including the provision of nutritious and culturally appropriate options for Indigenous passengers, and a healthy diet for VIA Rail's on-board employees.

We recognise that VIA Rail faces a considerable challenge with equipment availability as it awaits the government's decision on the renewal of the long-distance fleet; and will continue to do so at least until the early 2030s. Our current understanding is that allocating up to nine heritage fleet sleeping cars or Park cars to this route, in addition to the six Chateaux allocated to supplement the Renaissance sleepers on the *Ocean*, is not an unreasonable request in the near term. This is particularly important for tourism partners who must plan and market trips well in advance. However, we also ask that VIA Rail be as open as possible about its current fleet availability and allocation so that ourselves and others can correctly understand these operational constraints.

The reinstatement of the third round-trip to Winnipeg would not be possible without a return to previous scheduled running times. We hope that the recent announcement of \$60M in infrastructure investment will contribute to improving track conditions and making this possible in the medium term.

We strongly support VIA Rail's request for federal government investment to maintain and enhance its long-distance network and provide a full accessible experience for all passengers; and we look forward to continued collaboration as we advocate for a Canada-wide sustainable travel network of daily passenger services.

Sincerely,

Terence Johnson, President

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