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Chair: Mr. Peter Schiefke



Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities

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• (1935)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Peter Schiefke (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting no. 88 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Tuesday, March 7, 2023, the committee is meeting today to study projects of high frequency rail and to discuss committee business.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House Order of Thursday, June 23, 2022. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

[*English*]

Colleagues, appearing before us today are officials from the Department of Transport: Monsieur Vincent Robitaille, assistant deputy minister, high-frequency rail; Monsieur François Camiré, director general, technical, engineering and impact assessment, high-frequency rail; Chantale Côté, director general, policy and governance, high-frequency rail; and Luis Miguel Izquierdo Martín, acting director general, commercial and procurement, high-frequency rail.

Welcome to you all.

We'll now turn it over to you for your five-minute opening remarks. The floor is yours.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Vincent Robitaille (Assistant Deputy Minister, High Frequency Rail, Department of Transport): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

On behalf of Transport Canada, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to be a witness this evening.

My name is Vincent Robitaille, and I'm the assistant deputy minister responsible for high frequency rail, or HFR, at Transport Canada.

I would like to begin by acknowledging that we're gathered today on the traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe peoples.

The HFR project is the largest transportation infrastructure project that Canada has seen in generations. The objective of HFR is to offer faster, more reliable and more frequent rail service.

HFR is more than a rail project. Fifteen million people currently live in the Corridor. The populations and the economies of Ontario and Quebec will only continue to increase, as will the demand for all modes of transportation, including passenger rail. This project presents an opportunity to meet future demands while transforming rail travel to a more sustainable and more accessible way of travelling for future generations.

At this moment, VIA Rail cannot make improvements for passenger services. Rail congestion on the current tracks limits the frequency of departures, the reliability of arrivals and the speed of reaching the destination. To put it simply, without a transformative investment, 10 million trips per year would be taken using higher emitting modes.

[*English*]

HFR consists of building a new intercity passenger rail system over 1,000 kilometres in length to serve Toronto, Peterborough, Ottawa, Montreal, Laval, Trois-Rivières and Quebec City.

HFR will provide fast, reliable and frequent service. It will triple the number of rail passenger trips in the corridor to at least 17 million by 2059. It will at least double the number of train departures between major cities, with at least 12 departures per day. It will dramatically improve reliability to ensure that trains leave and arrive on time. It will provide faster service, offering shorter journey times. It will continue to serve communities currently served by Via Rail, such as Kingston, Cornwall and Drummondville, with expected improvements to scheduling and convenience. It will create thousands of well-paying jobs during the design, construction and operation of the service.

As an electrified service, it will deliver significant reductions in GHG emissions. It will positively contribute to the Government of Canada's commitment to reconciliation with indigenous peoples.

[*Translation*]

The HFR project will be delivered in four phases.

The first phase of the project, from 2017 to 2021, was focused on due diligence of the initial VIA Rail proposal. This assessment concluded that investment in passenger rail was necessary and would bring important social, economic and environmental value.

The government announced in Budget 2022 its decision to proceed with phase 2 of the project—the procurement phase. Also in 2022, a new subsidiary of VIA Rail, VIA HFR – VIA TGF Inc., was created to serve as the project delivery office for HFR.

[English]

While the HFR is building capacity, the government needs an innovative procurement process that takes into account the lessons learned from other Canadian and international infrastructure projects. Via HFR serves as technical and commercial adviser during this phase.

Once the procurement is completed and subject to government decisions, the project will then move to phase three, co-development. The co-development phase will be fully led by HFR Inc. The activities will focus on developing and finalizing the HFR design, accelerating engagement with stakeholders and preparing the final project agreement contract. This will be followed by a fourth phase, the actual construction of the project, and the fifth phase, which will be maintenance and operations over 40 years.

The HFR project continues to gather momentum during the procurement phase. In February 2023, the Government of Canada launched a request for qualifications to qualify three consortia to advance to the next phase. In July, the government qualified three bidding teams—composed of many of the most accomplished Canadian and international firms—and invited them to the request for proposals. Just this October, the government launched that request for proposals, which is a critical step that will lead to the selection of a private developer partner for the project. Proposals are scheduled to be received in the summer of 2024, with the evaluation completed in late 2024.

To maximize benefits and innovation, the request for proposals requires bidders to develop two solutions that meet the project outcomes—one with speeds of up to 200 kilometres per hour, and one that includes high-speed segments to achieve shorter journey times. This will allow for a rigorous assessment of the costs and benefits of incorporating high-speed rail on each segment of the corridor.

[Translation]

With this approach, the government will be able to choose the best solution for the HFR based on robust competition between many of the most accomplished Canadian and international firms. We are convinced that this type of competition will maximize innovation and deliver the best project for Canadians.

This concludes my remarks.

Once again, thank you for inviting me to speak on this exciting project.

[English]

It will be a pleasure to answer your questions.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Robitaille.

[English]

We'll begin tonight with Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Strahl, I'll turn the floor over to you. You have six minutes, sir.

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Hope, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here, and for the testimony. I'm looking forward to getting to some questions.

Before I do that, I would like to move the motion I brought forward at the last meeting and gave notice of. I will read it again, but everyone should have it in their digital binder.

It says:

That the committee undertake a five-meeting review of the impact of the carbon tax on the transportation sector and the increased costs it places on Canadians. That the Minister of Transport appear on this matter, and that the committee find additional resources necessary to accommodate these meetings.

Mr. Chair, just this week, the environment commissioner tabled his report, which indicated that Canada will not meet its climate targets, despite the carbon tax and other measures the government has imposed on Canadians. We know the carbon tax has a specific and particularly significant impact on the transport sector, whether it's trucking, trains or buses. We heard, in our study, that it was a significant cost. Marine and rail have carbon tax impacts. Those impacts are passed along throughout the supply chain to consumers.

One thing the commissioner said in the report he tabled was this:

...we expected that the plan would identify which groups would be disproportionately affected by the plan, which measures would mitigate those effects, and which process would assess if those measures are working. However, federal organizations lacked a comprehensive set of performance indicators and the disaggregated data (that is, separate data on affected groups) needed to understand the plan's effects on specific groups.

I think this committee has an opportunity to do the work the environment commissioner indicated had not been done by the government: to look at the specific impacts on the transport sector, which are then passed on to Canadian consumers. I think we should support this motion.

I move that one of our next studies be on the impacts of the carbon tax on the transportation sector.

I look forward to hearing what other committee members have to say about that.

● (1940)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Strahl.

The motion has been moved, so we'll get to discussion on that.

I open the floor up to questions and comments.

Go ahead, Mr. Muys.

Mr. Dan Muys (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Over the course of the last year, we've had a number of witnesses before committee. I've asked a number of times about the impact of the carbon tax, and we've heard from not just bus operators but people in other industries, in all those sectors that Mark mentioned, the air, marine and transport sectors. In fact, I heard from truckers at the fall fairs in my riding about the impact of the carbon tax on their industry.

The motion has been put forward, and I think it would be good to add that to the list of studies we have going forward.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Muys.

Are there any other questions or comments?

Go ahead, Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): I think this is an interesting study. We have a whole number of studies in the hopper, if I'm not mistaken. My preference would be to broaden the scope to look more broadly at the contribution that the transport sector makes to Canada's emissions profile, the impact of carbon pricing on the transportation sector and the vulnerability of Canada's transportation sector to extreme weather and climate impacts.

If we're going to proceed, I'll make that as an amendment, and I'm happy to provide it in writing to the clerk.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

Are there questions, comments or concerns over the amendment proposed by Mr. Bachrach?

Mr. Mark Strahl: I think we would like to see that. The details will obviously be important, in that, if we're going to have a study on the impacts of the carbon tax, we can talk about these other things.

I don't know that the motion prevents Mr. Bachrach from going down that road during one of those five meetings, but if he wants to submit that to the clerk, we'd certainly entertain it.

• (1945)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Bachrach has requested a five-minute break for us to be able to put that in writing and submit it to members. If members are in agreement with that, we will pause for five minutes.

• (1945)

(Pause)

• (1953)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order.

I just want to confirm with Mr. Strahl that he has, indeed, received the written version of Mr. Bachrach's amendment. I'm seeing a nodding head from Mr. Strahl.

I'll turn it over to Mr. Bachrach to read it out for everyone so that we can have a discussion on it.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I don't think this committee, at least during my time here—and I've been on the committee for all four years that I've been an MP—

has studied the climate dimension of transport. I think it would be a very interesting topic. My attempt here, first of all, is to build a consensus among committee members and, second, to broaden the scope of the study a bit to include the other dimensions of the challenge. Namely, these are the contribution that transport makes to our emissions as a country and the impact of climate change and extreme weather on the transportation system.

My amendment reads, "That the committee undertake a five-meeting review of the contribution of the transport sector to Canada's climate emissions profile, the impact of climate change and extreme weather on Canada's transport sector and the impact of the carbon tax on the transport sector. That the Minister of Transport appear on this matter, and that the committee find additional resources necessary to accommodate these meetings."

I could do it one more time. Do you need it one more time, Madam Clerk?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Carine Grand-Jean): It's just for the translation. It's up to you. You can just say it again.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I know you want me to try it in French, but I don't know if I'm quite up for it.

I will move that amendment, and I will also move a motion that we postpone the vote on the amendment and the motion until such time as we have the translation. I believe the clerk said we should have something in 30 minutes. It's just so we can get on with the testimony.

• (1955)

The Chair: That's a dilatory motion. We will go directly to a vote.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

Thanks for your patience, colleagues.

The clerk has just informed me that she has received the translation. She's going to try to get that out to everyone. It will probably take another two to three minutes. Please bear with us. Thank you.

Colleagues, the clerk has informed me that the translated version of the amendment proposed by Mr. Bachrach has been circulated, so we can continue the discussion.

With that in mind, I'll open up the floor to any questions, comments or concerns.

Go ahead, Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: I appreciate Mr. Bachrach's addition to expand the scope. Again, I think we could have had those discussions, but it's nice to have it there in black and white.

I would endorse the amendment and be prepared to go to a vote to approve this motion as soon as possible.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Strahl.

Are there any other questions, comments or concerns, colleagues? This is on the amendment.

Go ahead, Mr. Muys.

Mr. Dan Muys: Can I ask for a recorded vote?

The Chair: You can definitely ask for a recorded vote.

I will ask the clerk to read out the motion.

The Clerk: I will read the motion with the amendment.

[*Translation*]

It will read as follows: “That the committee undertake a five-meeting review of the contribution of the transport sector to Canada's climate emissions profile, the impact of climate change and extreme weather on Canada's transport sector, and the impact of the carbon tax on the transport sector; that the Minister of Transport appear on this matter and the committee find the additional resources to accommodate these meetings.”

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madam Clerk.

Are there any other questions or comments?

Mr. Muys, I believe you had your hand up. Was that just for a recorded vote?

Mr. Dan Muys: It was for a recorded vote.

The Chair: We will go to a vote on the amendment as proposed by Mr. Bachrach.

(Amendment negated: nays 6; yeas 5 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: We will now go back to the original motion.

Is there any discussion on the original motion, colleagues?

● (2000)

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Mr. Chair, in terms of timing, the motion doesn't specify timing. My assumption would be that the work the committee currently has scheduled would proceed and that this would follow the work that's currently in the calendar.

The Chair: That is a very good question, Mr. Bachrach.

I'll turn it over to the mover of the motion for clarification on what he had in mind.

Mr. Strahl, go ahead.

Mr. Mark Strahl: I think we can discuss that. We obviously have some motions in the queue on things like recreational boating, etc., that are for future studies when it's the Bloc Québécois's turn to call a motion, so this would simply be a motion that we would consider when we were coming to that part of the calendar.

I know we have some things before us right now—Bill C-33 and finishing this HFR study—so it would simply be one of the ones we could choose from when we have a committee business meeting, but obviously we would like to have this as soon as possible, given the timeliness of the environment commissioner's comments yesterday.

The Chair: Thank you very much for the clarification, Mr. Strahl.

If there are no other questions or comments, colleagues, we will go to a recorded vote on the motion that was put forward by Mr. Strahl.

(Motion negated: nays 6; yeas 5 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Mr. Strahl, I'll turn the floor back over to you.

You have three minutes and 52 seconds left for your line of questioning, sir.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Excellent. Thank you very much.

To the witnesses, we had some information come to light today. There was an Order Paper question that was tabled in the House of Commons just this afternoon that talked about some of the costs that have already been incurred by Transport Canada when it comes to high-frequency rail.

I just wanted to get your comments. One of the lines we noted was that over \$18 million has been paid to the Canada Infrastructure Bank for technical services. Given the controversy that's been surrounding the Canada Infrastructure Bank—in fact, this committee recommended that it be disbanded entirely—I'm just wondering if you can talk about what value for taxpayers was achieved by Transport Canada giving \$18 million to the Canada Infrastructure Bank for technical services related to high-frequency rail.

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: Thank you.

The \$18 million in question is with regard to services that were actually subcontracted by the Canada Infrastructure Bank, primarily for engineering studies performed by firms like Aecon and Arup, as well as the contracts with Ernst & Young. Many elements went into preparing the request for proposals that we launched last month.

Very few services were directly offered by employees of the Canada Infrastructure Bank. It was really for the technical work that was necessary to advance the project before Via HFR was created.

Mr. Mark Strahl: We also noted that an amount of about \$178,000 in direct contracts from Transport Canada was given to WSP Canada to study the project. I would note that they were also invited, or on the short list, to submit a proposal for the project. How did you ensure that a company that had already been contracted to do work on the preliminary studies for this project wasn't given an advantage over the other companies that were invited to submit for the RFP?

● (2005)

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: Those are very good questions. Thank you. They're very important.

Whenever there is preliminary work done like this on studies, the information is made available to all bidders. We're talking about studies that were done a few years ago. The number of firms qualified to do projects as large as HFR is limited, so we make sure that if we release them, and they've completed their obligations, we make the material that they've done available to everybody in an electronic data room. That way, everybody has access to the same information.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Okay.

Mr. Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have 35 seconds, Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: I will turn that over to the committee.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Iacono, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being with us this evening.

My question is for whoever feels comfortable answering it.

How will high frequency rail improve accessibility for Canadians? I am thinking particularly of the National Capital Region, where students attending the University of Ottawa, as I once did, and Carleton University take the train to work or school.

Also, how will it be determined which cities have stops? What criteria will guide the decision? Earlier, you mentioned Laval. I'm delighted to know that my riding and that of my colleague Ms. Koutrakis are among your choices.

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: Service will be greatly improved. There will be at least twice as many trains and trips every hour between the major cities. That will really provide greater flexibility, especially for students, who may come from another region and want to get back to their families when they finish their courses. They won't have to wait as long for the train, the train they take will be on time and the travel time will be shorter. This will mean they can spend more time with their family or more time at home. This applies to workers too, of course, and to everyone else. It will make the experience much more attractive for everyone. The train will become a better option for people who choose to drive right now, because the train will emit fewer greenhouse gases.

With regard to the cities selected, in my opening remarks, I mentioned the process we're following, in which the world's top consortia are competing robustly to find the best solutions. We need to determine such things as which cities have enough residents to generate an attractive ridership. HFR needs to enhance the quality of life for people in these communities, but it also needs to be efficient for trains to stop there. The studies being carried out as part of the request for proposals and those conducted once the partner has been selected will help determine that balance.

I should also mention that, although we're talking about 12 to 18 trains a day between two major urban centres, some trains may

stop more often than others. There are many ways to configure the service. The challenge will be to find the optimal solution for everyone.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: What role will VIA Rail play in passenger rail services in the Quebec City-Toronto corridor once the public-private model is in place?

In addition, will the VIA HFR team build new, modernized tracks similar to the existing ones, buy the tracks currently used by CN and CP, or will it be a mix of both? What are your options?

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: I will start by answering the second question, if you don't mind.

With respect to the tracks that will be used, we expect the majority of trips to be completed on tracks reserved for passenger trains. We have several ways of doing this. For example, tracks can be built alongside existing ones, or a corridor can be established a little further out. Either way, trains will no longer be stopped or slowed down by freight trains. This will therefore increase the overall capacity of the system, both for passengers and freight.

That will be more difficult to do in some places, however, especially in downtown areas, where it may always be necessary to share tracks. It will be the responsibility of VIA HFR, the corporation that has been created, to negotiate access to those tracks in order to guarantee the service we need and increase the capacity of those tracks in downtown areas. We have already begun discussing this with such rail companies as CN and CPKC.

With regard to VIA Rail's role, we'll be working closely with it and with VIA HFR, the new Crown corporation, throughout the selection process. So VIA Rail has an important role to play. However, when the project is completed, all services in the Windsor-Quebec City corridor will be of the public-private partnership's responsibility. As I mentioned in my remarks, we will see passenger numbers triple at least. Therefore, to provide service, all current employees will be needed, and thousands of new good jobs will even be created.

● (2010)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Iacono.

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval (Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes—Verchères, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to welcome the witnesses.

At our meeting earlier this week on Monday, we welcomed Michel Leblanc from the Chamber of Commerce of Metropolitan Montreal. Supposing there were a high frequency train where the journey would take around 2 hours and 50 minutes, I asked him if he thought many people in the business community would decide to take the train rather than drive. He answered quite clearly that they would not. In fact, he was quite pessimistic about the resulting modal shift.

Do you have any data on the modal shift from car and plane to train that might result from this project, compared with the status quo or a high-speed rail project?

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: Yes. As I mentioned, we expect ridership throughout the corridor to increase to 17 million passengers, up from a peak of 4.9 million passengers before the pandemic.

I don't have specific data on the modal shift with me. However, given that few people fly between Montreal and Quebec City, the vast majority of new passengers will be people who used to drive.

Many factors will make people choose the train. We hear a lot about speed, but there are five main factors. First, there's the cost of tickets. Then there's the train schedule. Right now, between Montreal and Quebec City, there are often only four trains a day. There are—

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: I'm going to stop you there, because I have other questions for you. You answered my question quite thoroughly, but for the benefit of all committee members, I'd like to ask you to provide the documents on the projected modal shift the project will generate. You did say that you have them, just that you don't have them with you. It would be worthwhile for the committee members to have them.

If I understand correctly, you have data on the projected modal shift with the HFR project, compared with the status quo, but I'm not sure I understood whether you also have data on the projected modal shift if we had a high-speed rail project, for example, or a project that would combine the two.

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: We focused our studies on a model of train that can travel at up to 200 km/h. That said, one factor I mentioned is travel time. As travel times get shorter, ridership will continue to increase.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: If I understand correctly, you have no data on the projected modal shift for a high-speed rail project. The only data you have relates to a high frequency rail project.

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: That's right.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: The government was very clearly moving towards a high frequency rail project. However, how can the project be geared to one type of train over another without complete data on both scenarios?

• (2015)

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: As part of the RFP, we're asking for a full proposal, which includes a scenario with high-speed segments. The proposal must include projected ridership levels and revenue, as well as maintenance and construction costs. We're using the competition to obtain a truly comprehensive description of all possible benefits. That's what we're going to get from the RFP, which closes this summer.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: If I understand correctly, you also don't have any estimated modal shift data for the hybrid version of the project, which would include high-speed segments.

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: We don't have specific estimates at this stage.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: We would be grateful if you could at least send us the data on high frequency rail. It would help us a little.

How much time do I have left, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have a minute and a half left.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Perfect.

I have another question for you.

This may have come up in previous meetings, but I was a little surprised to hear you say earlier that the chosen consortium would be responsible for the entire section between Quebec City and Windsor. So it's not just the new section that would be built, but the entire existing network.

I'm trying to understand why it will be that way. What impact will it have on employees and the operation of existing lines?

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: The goal is to create an integrated system. For the new HFR lines, we will not only create new express services between major cities through new connections to Laval, Trois-Rivières or Peterborough, which are not currently connected, but we will also improve the system as a whole, such as the tracks that serve the Great Lakes and run along the south shore of the St. Lawrence.

We didn't want to make the new service compete with the old one. We want to create the best possible network. We will be achieving a number of economies of scale in terms of rolling stock management and the cycle of trains that can move along the network.

The goal is therefore to find the best possible overall solution for all communities.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: However, surely you understand that it creates a great deal of uncertainty for people who work on the south shore and for everyone who uses that service.

The Chair: Unfortunately, your time is up, but you will have another turn soon to ask questions.

Mr. Bachrach, you have the floor for six minutes.

[English]

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of our witnesses for being here to answer our questions.

I'm aware that the range of questions you can answer is fairly circumscribed, and a lot of the questions that the committee has are really questions for the minister and for the government, so I'll try to keep my questions within the bounds of your responsibilities.

I noticed, Mr. Robitaille, that in your presentation there was no mention of labour, no mention of the people who currently work for Via Rail on the corridor. I know that the previous minister made some vague commitments about the role of working people in the HFR project. I looked through the call for expressions of interest and saw one little vague line in there that said something about how the proponents will be asked to detail their strategy for labour, or something along those lines—I don't have it in front of me. It did not reflect a commitment to ensure that the unionized labour who currently work on the train will be working on the train when the HFR is built.

Could you lay out, in some detail, what your discussions with labour have been and what the current commitment of HFR is to working folks who belong to unions like Unifor and currently play really important roles in getting people up and down the corridor?

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: The requirement of the procurement process is very clear. The employees of Via Rail working in the corridor must all have a job in the new service, so there will be no job losses.

Also, there is a requirement to work with the existing unions and to maintain the collective agreement and the existing benefits for the employees. This is built into the procurement process to provide that confidence for employees about their roles in the future.

The project will create thousands of jobs. There will be great opportunities for the existing employees and for a lot more people working in the rail sector.

• (2020)

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Because there are more employees who will be working in the rail sector on HFR once it's built, is there a commitment by this government or by HFR to ensure that those are unionized jobs and that the unions you currently work with are able to expand to cover the new roles that are part of this new rail line?

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: This is a requirement of the request for proposals.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: We heard from Unifor at our last meeting. You may be familiar with their testimony. It didn't seem like there was very strong alignment between the vision of the government for HFR and Unifor's vision for public rail along the corridor. How does that affect the project?

I'm trying to ask this question in a way that gets a productive answer. It just feels like having alignment between the people who work on the trains and the government entity that is creating this new rail line, rail service, would be really good and would help ensure the success of the project. How do you see building that alignment in the coming years?

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: I will speak to the requirements that exist in the procurement, if you'll allow me.

You made reference to a plan. The ultimate partner that is selected will need to demonstrate how they will work with the existing

union. Obviously, right now, we need to select a partner, and there's going to be that dance with three partners—the government, the private partner and, in this case, the existing union.

The goal is to get to an outcome that works well for everybody.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: We put in an Order Paper question to ask about the process that led to the decision to utilize a public-private partnership model for the procurement. Are you familiar with the assessment process that led to the selection of that procurement model?

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: Do you mean the value-for-money assessment that was done at the time?

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Yes, the information we received from the government was that there was an assessment of different procurement models. The government looked at 20 different transportation infrastructure projects around the world, I believe, and on the list of 20, they were all P3 projects. There weren't any public procurement examples in that list.

There was also a line in that response from the government that said that they compared the procurement model against a more traditional public procurement model, but there were no examples of projects that were procured that way.

I'm curious why no specific public projects were listed in the comparatives.

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: Maybe I can bring in a nuance in the analysis that was done. There are different types of public-private partnerships. You have those that include solely the design, construction and maintenance of the new infrastructure, for which there's a strong consensus that it's a good way to do a project like this.

Then there's the addition of the operation. In the model that we studied, we had a variety of models that included a public operator versus a private operator. That was part of the consideration.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I guess it's really the distinction...which I will bring up with you in the next round, because I see the chair making very insistent gestures towards me.

Thank you for your answers.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bachrach and Mr. Robitaille.

Next we have Dr. Lewis.

Dr. Lewis, you have five minutes, please.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis (Haldimand—Norfolk, CPC): Thank you.

Good evening, everyone.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for coming today.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to start off my time by bringing a motion for which I have provided the required notice. I believe it's important for this committee to consider this motion at this time, given the oversight role this committee has on the government's infrastructure policies, which takes on a greater urgency given the precarious state of the national infrastructure and our finances.

The motion, which has been distributed to all committee members in both official languages, is as follows:

Given that, after 6 1/2 years in operation, the Canada Infrastructure Bank:

(a) fails to get important infrastructure built, having only two projects “in use” to date;

(b) fails to leverage private sector dollars at even a 1:1 ratio;

(c) is ineffective, unproductive and can no longer be supported by \$35 billion taxpayer dollars during a housing supply crisis and when basic infrastructure in communities across Canada is either absent or in very poor condition;

the committee recognize that the Canada Infrastructure Bank has failed to meet its core mandate and promised value, is not delivering the infrastructure Canadians need, and that the committee report this opinion to the House.

If I may comment, Mr. Chair, I believe this motion speaks largely for itself, but I want to make a couple of comments.

I believe it's important for this committee to express to Parliament and to the government that we remain very dissatisfied with the government's flagship infrastructure policy, the Canada Infrastructure Bank. After six and a half years—since this bank was formed—it has completely failed to deliver. After eight years of this Prime Minister, Canadians are now paying double the mortgage payments that they were eight years ago, double the rent and double the price of homes. Canadians can't afford to keep subsidizing this \$35-billion failure.

While the government likes to point out a number of the investments that the bank has made, the reality is that investment announcements aren't the same as shovels in the ground and aren't the same as completed infrastructure projects that communities need and can use in this time of need.

The Canada Infrastructure Bank has failed to meet its core mandate as a bank that leverages private sector investment. When this bank was announced, the Liberals promised a return on investment of up to four times from private sectors. They even anticipated, with investments from the municipalities and the provinces, that it would yield a multiplier of 11 to one. Today, private investment is not even at a 1:1 ratio. Taxpayers are not getting the deal they were promised.

I would like to request this committee's support for expressing to the House that, in the opinion of the committee, the bank has not met its core mandate and promised value.

Thank you.

• (2025)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Lewis.

We'll turn the floor over to Mr. Badawey, who will be followed by Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Vance Badawey (Niagara Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think the one part I have concern with is reporting it back to the House. Concurrence debates in the House are time-consuming and are something that a lot of us are bothered with, to some extent. I'd like to move an amendment that we take that part out of the motion with respect to reporting to the House.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Badawey.

Is there any discussion or any comments on Mr. Badawey's amendment?

I'll turn the floor over to you, Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: I think the House should be made aware of our opinion on this matter. I think that's fairly fundamental to the motion.

I would also note that even today, in testimony on the high-frequency rail project, the Canada Infrastructure Bank, which this committee has recommended the government disband, is now an integral part of this going forward. The longer the bank remains in place, the more intertwined it will get in these types of projects.

The committee has done extensive studies on the Infrastructure Bank and has recommended that the \$35 billion go back into other infrastructure programs so that it can be better distributed to Canadians—as opposed to, as Dr. Lewis has said, two projects. Even today, we're hearing more evidence that this bank continues to be involved, even though this committee has made its recommendation, and I think it doesn't hurt to let the government know again our opinion on that end and on their ignoring our previous recommendation.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Strahl.

Is there other debate or questions, comments, concerns?

Mr. Bachrach, I'll turn the floor over to you.

• (2030)

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I would note that the substance of this motion reflects the opinion of the committee, which has been expressed through a report that had a single recommendation and was duly tabled in the House. There was an opportunity for a concurrence debate. I believe that occurred—I can't recall exactly—and it received an official, if somewhat inadequate, response from the government.

I support the overall thrust of the motion. My concern is that these motions are piling up at all of our committees and obstructing the work we're trying to do, namely to learn more and provide some constructive feedback on a massive infrastructure investment that, on the face of it, could have big implications for the most populous part of our country.

I don't support just chewing up the committee's time with all of these motions, particularly if they express things that the committee has already expressed. I appreciate it being brought forward, and sometimes repetition is necessary.

I would offer that one option would be to include the gist of this motion as a recommendation in the report that we will be putting together on HFR. It could be a PS at the end of the report: that we still think the CIB is not the right mechanism for funding infrastructure like this because of the government's fixation with delivering profits to private investors and that we prefer a public model.

I would hope that my Conservative friends would join me in voting for such a recommendation. I'll be voting against the motion.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Bachrach.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have the floor.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will also be voting against the motion, not because I don't like the content, but simply because the committee has already expressed its opinion in a report tabled in the House of Commons. Therefore, I see no need to keep engaging in the same debate over and over again, especially since we currently have an important study that I'd like to see move forward.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[*English*]

Seeing no other comments or questions, we'll go to a recorded vote on Mr. Badawey's amendment first.

(Amendment negatived: nays 6; yeas 5)

The Chair: We will now go to the main motion and have a recorded vote.

(Motion negatived: nays 7; yeas 4)

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Clerk. The motion does not carry.

Dr. Lewis, I'm going to turn the floor back over to you.

You have four minutes and 47 seconds left for your line of questioning.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Thank you.

My first question is for Mr. Robitaille.

You mentioned that the CIB subcontracted services in order to create the HFR. Is that correct? Was that correct evidence?

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: Yes.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: With regard to that \$18 million given back to the CIB, was that given from the HFR back to the CIB?

• (2035)

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: Yes, that is correct.

To bring a bit of context, from 2018 to 2021, during the due diligence phase, a joint project office composed of the Canada Infrastructure Bank and Via Rail did studies on the project. That was a continuation of this work that was done. At that point, it was funded by the Government of Canada.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Was the main contractor Via Rail, or did they hire subcontractors for the \$18 million?

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: The primary contractor is a joint venture between Arup and Aecom, which are architecture and engineering firms.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: You, or rather the HFR, received the government funding and then gave it back to the Canada Infrastructure Bank.

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: That's correct. The money was used to continue those contracts through the transition. Now all of this

work is done by the new Crown corporation, Via HFR Inc. That was a temporary measure until the Crown corporation was created.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Essentially, the Canada Infrastructure Bank hired contractors to the tune of \$18 million to confirm that HFR needed to be created. It was essentially 18 million dollars' worth of consultants.

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: It was to prepare the procurement that we launched this year. It was all the technical work that needed to be made available to bidders for the RFP process that is ongoing right now.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: It was just to get it ready to go through the RFP process for bidders to come in. You don't have a contractor yet; this \$18 million was all spent on consultants.

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: Yes, this was to prepare.... We're talking about 1,000 kilometres of new tracks. Various elements of the work were necessary to provide the information for our bidders to be able to bid on this project.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Wouldn't the contractors coming to you have solutions on how to move forward?

It seems like \$18 million is an outrageous amount to pay contractors. The CIB now needs this money back to pay out to contractors and nothing has really started yet. You don't even have a partner yet, but \$18 million has been spent on consultants.

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: Again, this work is essential on a major project like this. It is to provide all of the information about the nature of the lines, the rights of way that are available and the types of technologies that can be considered.

All of this work represents hundreds of documents that have been shared in an electronic data room for bidders to use to prepare their proposals. Each one of them will take nine months to build a proposal based on this information.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Was there a main contractor? Was there a main organization that dealt with all of the complexities of getting this information together? Who was the main contractor?

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: Basically, that contract is a joint venture between two large architectural and engineering companies. One of them is Arup, and the other one is Aecom. They were jointly responsible for preparing the work.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: I understand the total, as of October 11, was \$28,359,171.99.

Does it sound correct that we've actually spent up to \$28 million on contractors before this thing even got off the ground?

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: Those figures are accurate.

Again, given the size and scope of this project, those numbers are what would be expected.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Lewis.

Thank you, Monsieur Robitaille.

Next we have Ms. Koutrakis.

The floor is yours. You have five minutes, please.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis (Vimy, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here with us at a late sitting of the TRAN committee. It's very much appreciated.

I want to speak a little bit about reliability. As we know, reliability is a big plus of HFR and also for high-speed rail, because they operate on a dedicated passenger track. We also know that Via currently operates on some of its own track and mostly on host railways like CN.

Very roughly, what is the difference in reliability and on-time performance between the two? Can we say a passenger railway can truly be successful on other people's tracks, competing with their trains?

• (2040)

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: Well, unfortunately, the reliability on those tracks has been going down. I will share the latest high-level figures that I'm aware of. Maybe Via Rail would be in a better position to have the exact figures.

Our understanding is that on the tracks they own, which are mostly around Ottawa, they have over 90% reliability for on-time performance, being within about five minutes of the arrival time that was on the tickets. Outside of those railways, this goes down to below 70%. Again, we could get the precise figure, but you see the massive difference between the two.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: What I'm hearing is that if we go with HFR and dedicated passenger railway, the on-time performance will also be much better. Is that accurate?

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: It is, indeed. All around the world, when you see the best service, this is the key. If the passenger railway controls the track, then it is able to run services in certain places that are precise to the second. That makes a world of difference for the passenger experience.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: As we've heard from many colleagues around the table in previous testimony and previous meetings, with large infrastructure projects such as this, it is probably going to be very hard to keep on budget. We have seen projects be delayed and go over budget.

What measures have been put in place to ensure that costs are properly managed over the course of the project? How certain are we that they'll try to keep as close as possible to the budget?

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: Many of the members of the HFR team had the honour of also working on the Samuel De Champlain Bridge before. It was a very successful project. We are very humbled by the difficulty of delivering major infrastructure projects and the need to learn from all the best things that are done around the world.

In the context of HFR, a number of things are being done, obviously, to make sure that costs are controlled and remain as low as possible. The first step was to create this new Crown corporation for HFR to have the expertise that is needed. It is essential to have

the best experts on our side to manage the project over the long term.

The second is to use competition. We are having that robust competition right now to select a partner. Then that partner will be responsible for the design. When we look at all the construction that will need to happen on the corridor, it's not one project but a thousand small projects. For each one of them, there are different ways to shape them. They will be subject to their own competition. We will also have significant incentives built into the contract to ensure adherence to the budget and find the best ways to deliver the project.

Those are just a couple of examples, as you can imagine, built into the different aspects of our managing the project.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: In my previous role as parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Transport, I used to have these conversations with the minister, and I'd ask him why we would have HFR and not high-speed rail. He would say it was because of the cost.

Would you be able to educate us a little bit more as to why the cost is so much higher for high-speed rail than for HFR? Is it because of rail crossings? Is it because of expropriations? What types of things would increase the cost?

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: I'll start with some of the elements, and I'll invite my colleague Mr. Camiré to also provide some elements.

At a high level, once the train goes faster than 200 kilometres per hour, the difference is that you need a fully protected right of way. This means that the tracks are fenced. There cannot be at-grade crossings. That means viaducts over the road. It also means that the curves cannot be as great because the train is going to travel faster—

• (2045)

The Chair: Unfortunately, I am going to cut you off there, although I really wanted to hear the answer to that question. Perhaps a colleague, another member of the committee, will cede some of their time to hear the rest of that answer.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval now as the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll pick up where my colleague left off.

At our last meeting, I asked Michel Leblanc why the figures we're being fed comparing the cost of high-speed rail to that of high frequency rail were 3 to 4 times higher here than elsewhere. We were talking about \$65 billion versus \$12 billion. Finally, I reviewed my cases and realized that the \$65 billion in costs communicated this summer for high-speed rail are no longer accurate. Now it would cost \$80 billion.

Can you tell me how you arrived at those figures? It's very hard for us to make an assessment, but it would be interesting to know how you got those numbers.

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: If I may, I'd like to explain the difference in cost.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: I would rather you answer my question, because I really don't have much time.

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: Perfect.

The comparative analysis that was done considered the average cost to build high-speed rail elsewhere in the world and adapt everything to the Canadian system. It is therefore based on high-level studies.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Could you send the committee the documents on which you based the figures? At the last committee meeting, I talked about the cost of a project carried out in Spain, and the difference was absolutely incomparable. We'd be very grateful if you could send us the data so we can understand how you got those numbers.

Mr. Vincent Robitaille: As long as the information doesn't compromise the competitive process, we'll be able to send you the data.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Mr. Chair, if I may, I'd like to introduce a motion on this.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: In fact, I'd like to introduce two motions with essentially the same content.

Here is the first one:

That Transport Canada provide the Committee with all documents relating to the cost estimate for the TGF project and for a possible project allowing high-speed trains to run, free of any redactions; that these documents be sent to the Clerk of the Committee, in both official languages, no later than November 24, 2023.

The second one is as follows:

That VIA HFR - VIA TGF Inc. produce to the Committee all documents relating to the cost estimate for the TGF project and for a possible project allowing the circulation of high-speed trains, free of any redactions; that these documents be sent to the Clerk of the Committee, in both official languages, no later than November 24, 2023.

As you can see, the motions have similar wording. The only difference is that the first is for Transport Canada and the second is for VIA HFR.

Our society needs to have an informed debate and, to do that, we need to know the comparative figures between the cost of high-speed rail and that of high frequency rail. Furthermore, we need to know whether the data currently circulating is reliable. So we need this information.

I have the motions in both official languages. I can send them to the clerk and the committee members.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

If it's okay with everyone, we'll suspend the meeting for a few minutes so we can get the motions distributed in both official languages.

[*English*]

I see agreement.

We'll suspend for two minutes.

• (2045)

(Pause)

• (2100)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order.

We will now open the discussion on the two motions put forward by Mr. Barsalou-Duval. The first one is the Transport Canada motion and the second one is on Via HFR.

Does anybody want to go first?

Yes, go ahead, Mr. Badawey.

Mr. Vance Badawey: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This is one of the questions I was going to ask with respect to financing. It is always important in the process to get a financial plan in place, taking the project into consideration, but what I'm also interested in is an integrated capital transportation plan based on a transportation logistics strategy. It goes bigger than that. Yes, we're going to talk about HFR, but we're also going to talk about high-speed rail. I don't think it's either-or. Both can be accommodated, depending on the jurisdictions we're talking about and, of course, the infrastructure that goes along with that.

I understand and appreciate the motion, in that respect. However, as we move along, I think what will happen is—no pun intended—it will become hub and spoke. You're also going to talk about the costs attributed to the residual parts of this plan. What is it going to cost marine, for example, with the cruise shipping? What's it going to cost the road, with the arterials? What's it going to cost municipalities, with the crossings? The list goes on. We're going to have a lot of discussion like that as this project gets under way.

The only concern I have with this motion is about the size of the project. It's no different from the Gordie Howe bridge or when the St. Lawrence Seaway was built 60 years ago. This is a big project. This is one of the biggest—if not the biggest—transportation-related projects in over 60 years. It's very exciting, by the way. I don't want to get into that now. I'll get into that when I get my turn for a question.

My concern is twofold.

First, it's one thing to ask Transport Canada to provide the committee with all the documents. That's you. That's us. That's fine. However, it's a bit more challenging to ask Via Rail for those documents. Via Rail is a private corporation, albeit at arm's length. It's still private and, quite frankly, in my opinion, they don't have to do that. It doesn't matter what this motion says. That's one thing. I'm just trying to be realistic.

I'll let others speak before I put this amendment forward, but I would suggest this for the motion, Mr. Chair, first off: that with respect to Via Rail, after "That", we put "we request". That's point one.

Point two is about redactions. None of us like redactions, and I include ourselves on this side of the horseshoe. However, I go back to my earlier comments with respect to the size of the project and those who will be involved in this project. It's a big project with a lot of people involved. Frankly, the only concern is proprietary. For proprietary considerations, there may have to be redactions based on the confidentiality of whatever they may be proposing for the actual project itself. It's not for us to impede on the proprietary rights of the partners who may be part of this project. It may in fact be difficult to ask for no redactions in those instances.

Other than that, I have no concerns. I want to hear others speak, because I might then have more concerns.

At this point in time, I'll leave it at that. I'll pass it on to my colleagues for their comments.

• (2105)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Badawey.

I see Ms. Koutrakis and Mr. Iacono have their hands up. I will then go to Dr. Lewis. Then we'll see where we go from there.

Ms. Koutrakis, the floor is yours.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Similar to my colleague's objections, my biggest concern is over "free of any redactions". I think we need to be very careful and not set precedents when we're putting out motions such as these for very important, large projects—that we protect information that needs to be protected. I don't think any one of us wants to ask for something that may have unintended consequences, especially on such a large project.

Therefore, for me, as well, the subject matter is not an issue. It's the "free of any redactions" regarding documents when we're presenting this kind of motion to the committee—not only to our committee but also to any committee. We've seen this time and again. Motions are dropped at various committees and this becomes an issue.

We've been working so well at this committee, very collegially. We seem to find compromise. We agree where we can agree, and we don't agree when we don't agree, but we always end up in a very sweet spot. I would hate to see something as important as this become a contentious matter that delays the very important work we're doing here in the transport committee.

Those are my comments.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Koutrakis.

Is it a point of order, Mr. Bachrach?

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: No, it's just to get on the speaking list.

The Chair: Perfect. Yes, I will add you on.

Next we have Mr. Iacono, followed by Dr. Lewis, Mr. Strahl and Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Iacono, go ahead.

Mr. Angelo Iacono: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I feel like we're going on a fishing expedition, asking Via Rail and Transport Canada for documents, but we're being redundant here. I don't think Via Rail would have all the documents; rather, Transport Canada would have more documents.

However, what we have forgotten here is that this project is still at the preliminary stage. We know half of the partners. We don't know the other half of the partners—the other half still has to be selected—so I don't think it would be fair or appropriate that documents be shared when we still don't know who the official other half of the partnership will be. I think they would be sharing confidential information, which would tamper with the selection process of the chosen company that will be partnered with Via HFR.

I think it's a bit too open. We're going on a fishing expedition here. Divulging this kind of information would be unfair to the selection process because, indeed, the information that is divulged in this committee is public.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Iacono.

Next, we'll go to Dr. Lewis. The floor is yours.

Ms. Leslyn Lewis: Thank you.

First, I just want to say that I do believe that Via Rail is at least a quasi-Crown corporation, so I wouldn't see it as a private entity. Even if it were a private entity, I think it's perfectly within the committee's scope to request documents. If the company does not wish to provide that information, it can easily cite an objection of proprietary information or whatever reason for which it's choosing not to provide it.

However, I caution this committee that these are taxpayer dollars. In the quest for transparency, it is essential that taxpayers know how these funds are being spent, especially since the projections have been changed so many times and we are in such a precarious situation with respect to our infrastructure and our finances within this country. I think that taxpayers have the right to know what is happening, and in the spirit of transparency, I think that it's perfectly legitimate to request these documents.

• (2110)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Lewis.

Now I'll turn the floor over to Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you.

I just want to follow up on Dr. Lewis's comments.

As members of Parliament and as committees, we have rights outlined in Bosc and Gagnon, which very clearly indicates that we have the right to request.... The production of papers is an absolute right of the House and its committees, so the suggestion that we are doing anything inappropriate or nefarious by requesting documents from entities that are funded by tax dollars for the benefit of.... You know, this project is for the benefit of Canadians. Thus far, all of the studies done on this project have been funded by taxpayer dollars. We heard today what some of the amounts are. We're approaching \$30 million in fees for consulting work on this project.

I think Mr. Barsalou-Duval's motion is completely in order. Any attempt to water it down is a political choice; it's not a procedural necessity. *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* is very clear that we have this right and that we can exercise it if we choose to do so.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Strahl.

Next I have Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

There has been a bit of a recurring conversation about the production of documents. My understanding is that committees do have the power to order documents without redaction and that the power is absolute. At the same time, all of us as committee members recognize the importance of not compromising certain types of information, including proprietary commercial information.

Perhaps the compromise we can reach is that, as other committees have done, we ask for the documents be produced and discussed at an in camera meeting of the committee and we ask the House to provide some legal resources to advise the committee on which aspects of the information might be commercially sensitive or proprietary. Based on that, we'd decide which aspects of the information could be properly discussed in a public realm.

That would be my preference, because our experience has been that, when you ask for documents and accept some level of redaction, typically the level of redaction that comes back is pretty severe. Sometimes there's more black than white, and it could be hard to know what exactly is behind all the redaction. That would be my preference.

While I have the floor, Mr. Chair, and seeing the time, I would like to take a brief moment to speak to another matter. It won't take me very long. I think most Canadians were disgusted to learn about several recent incidents involving the mistreatment of air passengers who are people living with disabilities and who experienced some horrific treatment on board Air Canada flights.

In light of those events, in light of those circumstances, I would like to put on notice the following motion:

That, given multiple recent reports of persons with disabilities facing discrimination and unacceptable treatment while travelling with Canadian airlines, and that Air Canada admitted it violated Canadian disability regulations—

Mr. Mark Strahl: This is out of order, Mr. Chair.

You can't move a motion while we're discussing another motion.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: I'm not moving a motion, Mr. Strahl.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Strahl.

I just conferred with the clerk. Mr. Bachrach is just giving a notice of motion, so I'm letting him proceed with that.

Mr. Taylor Bachrach: Thank you, Chair.

I'll just start from the top. Given how important this matter is and how egregious these incidents were, this is a matter that concerns all Canadians. It will only take me a moment.

I hereby put on notice the following motion:

That, given multiple recent reports of persons with disabilities facing discrimination and unacceptable treatment while travelling with Canadian airlines, and that Air Canada admitted it violated Canadian disability regulations;

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities undertake a study on the state of accessible transportation for persons with disabilities on Canadian airlines and the Accessible Transportation for Persons with Disabilities Regulations;

That the committee invite the Minister of Transport, the CEOs of Air Canada and WestJet, the Auditor General of Canada, experts and other stakeholders;

That the committee hold a minimum of three meetings and report its findings and recommendations to the House; and

That the government table a comprehensive response to the report.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (2115)

The Chair: The notice has been received.

Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval now has the floor.

Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate the arguments of my colleagues around the table. There seems to be no opposition to the first motion, which concerns Transport Canada. We could take care of this motion right away and at least we could move forward.

With respect to the second motion, my colleague Mr. Bachrach's suggestion that we get to see the documents without them being made public at first may be a good solution. I don't know what my other colleagues around the table think of that.

We may have other possible solutions for not making information about private businesses public when it could be sensitive while this project is being carried out.

In any event, I feel the intention is very clear: This is about obtaining information about the costs. I think everyone stands to benefit from it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[English]

Next, I have Mr. Rogers.

Mr. Churence Rogers (Bonavista—Burin—Trinity, Lib.): Thanks, Chair.

I've lost my train of thought with all the different motions coming forward. We seem to be going all over the place here.

On Mr. Barsalou-Duval's motion, the only part that concerns me is the redaction piece when we talk about no redactions. I'm not going to repeat all the points that some of the other members of the committee have already expressed with regard to commercial sensitivity and divulging what could be very private information going into that...already involved in that process. For that reason, I cannot support that particular motion, unless we have an amendment to remove that phrase from the motion.

On the other motion that was just introduced, I'll have a comment later on as we get an opportunity to debate or talk about that particular motion, because I was interested in what was just proposed and I think it's probably one of the motions that I'd be very interested in supporting.

On Mr. Barsalou-Duval's motion, that's my biggest concern. Unless we do an amendment and remove that term around redaction, I will have difficulty trying to support that kind of motion.

I'll leave it there, Mr. Chair. I'm sure some other members have their own perspective on this.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Rogers.

I have Mr. Hardie, followed by Mr. Muys and Mr. Strahl.

Go ahead, Mr. Hardie.

Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am a visitor here, but I was on this committee from 2015 to 2019, and between me and Mr. Iacono we made such a mess of things that they told me to go someplace else—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Ken Hardie: —but here I am again.

My background involves many years of working with Metro Vancouver's transportation authority, TransLink, where we introduced commuter rail. As well, we built some very large capital projects, including the Canada Line, which is a subway, basically, that runs from the Vancouver airport to downtown Vancouver.

When I look at Mr. Barsalou-Duval's motion, I'm concerned that we're just going to be fixating on cost without really understanding what's behind the cost. I'm not sure how many consortia are bidding on this. You mentioned “design, build and operate”. I don't know if it's a full DBFO—design, build, finance and operate—because if that is the case, then you're dealing with the spreading of risk, especially to the private partner, which is one of the reasons why you go for a P3.

The number itself, the cost, doesn't necessarily reveal all that you need to know. If the proposal right now is for high-frequency rail and you're looking for a cost on high-speed rail, there will be some significant differences.

Mr. Robitaille, I believe you mentioned that the current design would have some sharing of rail line capacity with freight, and you're not going to operate high-speed rail on track that's been beaten to death by heavy-duty freight cars. That would mean, among other things, probably having to build a dedicated rail link all the way through, and then you have to deal with issues like grade separation, crossings, etc., which impose additional costs.

The thing is, depending on the design the proponent is bringing forward, you're going to get a variety of cost estimates, and without understanding what's behind the cost estimates, you're shopping by price alone, which isn't necessarily going to produce the kind of result you're looking for, unless you know the design attributes. You might be looking at a BMW model versus a Volkswagen model, but the BMW model might actually in the long run.... Particularly when you're dealing with the long-term operating and maintenance, building something more expensive off the top can sometimes save you money in the long run.

These are all aspects of this that need to be considered above and beyond the bottom line cost. Without that additional perspective and context, asking for cost alone is really not going to be terribly revealing or terribly useful.

If I were permanently on this committee, I'd probably have a lot more to say, having been in these discussions all along, but just the high-level stuff and the experience that I have had in the past suggest that this motion—I have an analogy that always gets me in trouble so I'm not going to go there—doesn't reveal enough to actually make a very good decision after just looking at the cost that's revealed on a particular project.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (2120)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hardie.

Next, we'll go to Mr. Muys, who will be followed by Mr. Strahl, Mr. Badawey, Mr. Iacono, Ms. Koutrakis, Mr. Bachrach and Mr. Rogers.

Mr. Muys, the floor is yours.

Mr. Dan Muys: I would simply note that on the Via Rail website, under the “Governance & Ethics” section, they say that Via Rail believes in “openness and transparency” and they are “essential to building trusted relationships with customers, partners, and the public” in general. There you go: “openness and transparency” without any redaction and without the chorus of excuses.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Muys.

Next is Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: In seeing the speakers list and the time, I think it's fairly clear what's afoot here.

I would simply go back to Mr. Bachrach's original comments that there are ways to address the concerns around redactions without giving the government or its Crown corporations the ability to redact what they wish to redact. If there are to be redactions, they should be made by legal counsel, who have a different lens and who want to get the information out that is safe to release. Those decisions can be made by House of Commons legal services. We can get that advice.

If that is truly the concern, Mr. Bachrach has provided the template that has been used before to address that. If this is simply a way to postpone this motion so that this does not come out, or to leave it to the entities that would have an interest in redacting based on their own preference as to what is revealed, I think that's a mistake. I think we wouldn't be doing our job.

I would go back to what Mr. Bachrach proposed. If we want to consider the documents in camera and if we want to have legal advice given to us by House of Commons lawyers, not by lawyers who are going to redact first and ask questions later, I think this is the way we should go about this. Anything else starts to look like there is something to hide and there's a facilitation of that. Certainly I don't think we want to have the reputation, as a committee, that we're going to allow that.

Let's go with Mr. Barsalou-Duval's motion as amended by Mr. Bachrach.

• (2125)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Strahl.

Next, I'll go to Mr. Badawey.

Mr. Vance Badawey: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

You know, I'm really trying to make this work because I agree with it, quite frankly. As I said to Mr. Barsalou-Duval earlier, this has to happen anyway. This is the job of the committee as this project is going to unfold. I agree with what Mr. Strahl just said. I don't agree with Mr. Muys, but that's another story altogether, which we'll discuss in the future.

I'll say this. There's no question that Via Rail wants to be open and transparent, but the law is the law when it comes to proprietary information.

The second part of it is that, as we look forward to the cost estimates, as I mentioned earlier, my interest is not only in this project but also in the implications the costs are going to have on other projects that are going to support this project. We all recognize the fact—we had this discussion with the members of the team before the meeting started—that when we put high-speed and/or high-frequency rail in place, we're going to see a lot of other cost implications with other methods of transportation that will complement this project. We're going to see more costs, for example, with municipal transit. Look at the Province of Ontario with Metrolinx. There are services, locally and regionally, that are going to complement this project. Therefore, they should have costs attributed to them. It's not just the federal government. It's going to be attached to local, municipal, regional, provincial and, in some jurisdictions throughout the country, even private.

I appreciate where Mr. Barsalou-Duval is going because, at the end of the day, we do want to put in place an overall umbrella transportation and logistics strategy, which this is going to be a part of. As well, with that strategy, there is going to be a cost, which this is going to be a part of, so I get it.

From the business side, let's put aside the politics, put aside the partisanship, and let's just deal with the business of government. That's what this is about, and I support that. It's just a matter of showing respect to our partners vis-à-vis proprietary. Just to get a bit granular on that, we do have to take into consideration what's actually in the contracts that are going out to the folks who are going to be part of this project and what can be released publicly. That's business.

At the end of the day, we have to show that respect, with respect to the contracts that are going out. The second layer is with the proprietary considerations based on who gets those contracts. The third layer is our due diligence, our fiduciary responsibility, as the project proceeds, with respect to the costs attached to it. That is business.

Once again, let's put the politics and the partisanship aside and deal with the business.

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, I thank you for that.

Having said that, on the next part, which goes to the amendment that Mr. Bachrach has attached to this motion, I think that's a great idea. I'll take it a step further. Instead of doing it after the fact, we should possibly consider doing it before the fact.

Why don't we ask for that in camera meeting at our next meeting? We could ask those very questions in terms of what can be considered proprietary versus assuming that, as Mr. Strahl said, we can actually ask for this information and get it—which I don't agree with, by the way. Some of those companies, whether we subpoena them or not, legally don't have to give out proprietary information. I could be wrong, and I stand to be corrected, but I think we should at least validate that at our next meeting and ask some of those questions—unless, Mr. Chairman, you will allow me to ask these questions of the witnesses right now, which in fact we could have done half an hour ago. We probably could have received a lot of the information contained within this motion based on the witnesses, the folks who are doing the project, who are here tonight.

Mr. Chair, if I may, I'm going to ask for your guidance. Would it be appropriate for me to ask the witnesses the question with respect to the proprietary commercial aspects of it, as well as what may be in the contracts that they can divulge that may prevent us from getting some of this information and therefore it would have to be redacted?

• (2130)

The Chair: Unfortunately, colleagues, I was just informed by the clerk that we have a two-hour hard stop for services, so I'm going to have to adjourn the meeting. We've reached our two-hour mark.

Have a wonderful break. I look forward to seeing you on the Monday we return.

Have safe travels home everyone. If not, I'll see you in the House tomorrow.

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