

Banff train proposal picks up steam



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Liricon's proposed transformation of the Banff Train Station into the Banff Eco-Transit Hub. HANDOUT

Banff is a national treasure, but the serenity of the park is often overtaken by the crush of visitors. Finding a moment to contemplate the splendour of Mount Rundle entails many more moments of searching for a parking spot. In the past decade, Parks Canada says vehicle traffic in Banff National Park has increased by 30 per cent, and on some roads to key attractions, by 70 per cent. More than four million people visit each year,

and the numbers are only expected to grow – especially once the world wriggles out of the grip of COVID-19.

The long-standing issue of Banff traffic and congestion has prompted a search for better and greener ways to move people to, and around, the park. The most attention-grabbing idea so far is the return of passenger train service between Calgary and Banff.

But before anyone seriously contemplates the (at least) \$1-billion train plan, there are already significant hurdles, including concerns about the impact on ecologically sensitive Bow Valley, how it would affect a Canadian Pacific Railway corridor that is already super-busy with freight, and logistical challenges of twinning a rail line through places such as downtown Calgary or First Nation land.

But a starting point for train proponents: There is some rarely seen federal-provincial agreement that the train idea is cool.

Someday, the train might even run on the zero-emission hydrogen fuel, giving Alberta some much-needed green cred. Its backers envisage making the town of Banff a more pedestrian-friendly, Alps-type of tourist destination. Unlike now, it could make getting there half the fun.

In June, the Canada Infrastructure Bank said it would work with the Alberta government to examine the feasibility of 130 kilometres of “sustainable rail service” between the Calgary airport and Banff. The Crown corporation is still working on its analysis. But both the federal Liberals and Alberta’s United Conservative Party – not often inclined to get along – already have made clear the project ticks a lot of boxes, on the economy and the environment.

Federal Infrastructure Minister Catherine McKenna has said the train “would reduce congestion, lower emissions [and] protect the pristine environment while creating jobs and economic opportunity.” David Knight Legg, the former principal adviser to Premier Jason Kenney put in charge of Invest Alberta in September, is a booster, too. “Once in a while you come across a project that everyone seems to support, and the train is one of those,” he said.

For decades, taking the train was the way to go to Banff. Train ridership eventually declined, and passenger service between Calgary and Banff stopped in 1990 after Ottawa cut its funding to Via Rail, which in turn reduced passenger rail routes across the country.

A new passenger service would mean building a dedicated passenger rail line as a twin to the existing CPR track to avoid impeding the near-constant shipping of freight. The current proposal would begin at the Calgary airport and make stops downtown, and in Cochrane, the Morley reserve of the Stoney Nakoda Nations and Canmore.

Some of the economic development selling points: A train could make it easier for workers to get to Banff, where there’s always demand for more hotel and restaurant

staff. International travellers might be inclined to spend a night downtown instead of bypassing Calgary. And visitors from abroad would certainly rather take a train than rent a car, “especially in the winter,” said Mr. Knight Legg.

The train is only a topic of discussion in 2020 because of Jan and Adam Waterous, prominent Banff residents who own the Mount Norquay Ski Resort and hold a long-term lease on the Banff train station through their holding company, Liricon Capital. Mr. Waterous is a well-known financier in Calgary energy circles, and Ms. Waterous is a public-relations professional. She said part of her motivation as a “private-sector catalyst” is Parks Canada’s inaction on transportation issues. They pitched the train idea to the Infrastructure Bank.

“There were obvious solutions that had been around for decades,” she says, “that Parks Canada was doing absolutely nothing to advance.”

The couple is also pushing for a range of public transportation initiatives for the park and the town of Banff, including construction of a new gondola from the train station to their ski hill. (Parks Canada has already turned down the application for the gondola, but Ms. Waterous said they will try again with a revamped application.) They are ideas that align with Liricon business interests but also, Ms. Waterous argued, address the significant issue of vehicle congestion.

Not everyone shares the unbridled enthusiasm for the train. The CP tracks bisect the Stoney Nakoda Nations’ main reserve, Morley. Ryan Robb, chief executive officer of the Stoney Tribal Administration, said a second track would require a land surrender – a complicated process – or, at the very least, consultations with the First Nation.

Mr. Robb said the Nations want to find ways to decrease traffic on the Trans-Canada Highway, and he envisages a scenario where a First Nation-owned bus transportation company moves visitors back and forth. He said they were surprised by the Canada Infrastructure Bank’s June announcement that they would study the train proposal.

“We see rail as the potential option. However, it’s not the only option.”

Likewise, CP has laid out a list of conditions. The Canadian railroad giant questions whether there’s room to build new capacity in downtown Calgary, and wants assurances a passenger line can be built without hindering capacity, or future growth, on its busy Western corridor rail lines.

“CP is not in a position to relinquish any freight capacity on that corridor,” said a letter from CP senior vice-president James Clements.

Banff conservationist Harvey Locke has been outspoken against the Liricon proposal for a new gondola, arguing it’s part and parcel of the train plan – which he calls another bad idea. “I don’t want to put public subsidies into building another line of train track up the ecologically fragile Bow Valley.”

Mr. Locke said the issue goes far beyond the number of cars in Banff, and has to do with the number of people. He argues the park needs to consider absolute limits on crowds at some sites.

It's still a question of too many people, or too many cars. A study commissioned by Liricon said the millions of Banff road trips come with a huge carbon footprint, and wide-scale public-transit measures in similar U.S. national parks are proof there are better ways of doing things. This month, it will launch a campaign focused on how the park can get to net-zero emissions by 2035.

At the same time, Parks Canada announced it will create an expert panel to provide advice on the "sustainable movement of visitors," including a focus on "green" transport. Banff superintendent Dave McDonough emphasized the park has boosted public transit in recent years, and that electric or autonomous vehicles could play a role in the future.

"We are looking at a bit of a crossroads" for the iconic national park, Mr. McDonough said, noting the panel's final report should be done in early 2023.

Some kind of change is coming to the way people get into, around and out of Banff National Park. It's only a question of how, and how soon.