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Chair

Mr. Merv Tweed

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Merv Tweed (Brandon—Souris, CPC)): Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to meeting number 18 of the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure, and Communities. Pursuant to standing order 108(2), we are starting our study on high-speed rail in Canada.

Joining us today from the Department of Transport are Ms. Helena Borges, director general, surface transportation policy; and Kevin Lawless, senior strategic policy and special project officer, surface transportation policy.

Mr. Jean.

Mr. Brian Jean (Fort McMurray—Athabasca, CPC): On a point of order, I want to advise the committee that I have circulated a motion. I haven't given 48 hours' notice, but I wanted to circulate it prior to the committee meeting in case people needed to check with other offices as to whether or not it could be dealt with at the end of committee. If not, that's fine. I'll give the 48 hours' notice now and we can deal with it on Thursday.

One way or the other, I just wanted to give each member every opportunity to deal with it accordingly. But I would say deal with it at the end of the meeting today. I would like 15 minutes at the end, if possible, and if we have the time to talk about it.

The Chair: Okay. Are there any other comments?

We do need a motion from the floor for the budget, Mr. Volpe.

Hon. Joseph Volpe (Eglinton—Lawrence, Lib.): I'd like to move this, but I have a particular concern, Mr. Chair.

There are just two words missing here. One is "France", and the other one is "Spain". I don't think we can cover it all with \$7,000. Is that an oversight by the parliamentary secretary, who is holding us hostage to his motion?

The Chair: Mr. Jean.

Mr. Brian Jean: I just wanted to let Mr. Volpe know that I'm only about seven hours away from my pilot's licence, so I'll be able to fly us all over there and we'll be able to do that on a reasonable budget.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Brian Jean: I do have about 32 hours now.

The Chair: That's wonderful.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: That was a scary thought before you said the hours.

Mr. Gerard Kennedy (Parkdale—High Park, Lib.): I move that—

Hon. Joseph Volpe: What about the motion on the proposed budget for this study?

The Chair: We have a motion on the floor for approximately \$7,000 for the committee's study.

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Wonderful. Thank you very much.

Now we'll move on to our guests. Please proceed.

Ms. Helena Borges (Director General, Surface Transportation Policy, Department of Transport): Thank you very much for inviting us to be here today.

We have provided the committee with what we think are key documents that you might want to take into account for your study. Today, all I'll do is give a quick recap of what has happened over the last 15 years and what we have embarked on in looking at high-speed rail.

Before I start, I'll note a couple of definitions, because I'm sure that during the discussion the terminology will come up. It's not as if this is precise terminology, but it is the terminology we refer to. There is high-speed rail, higher-speed rail, and what we call conventional or traditional rail services.

I'll start with the latter. Conventional rail is basically the kind of service that VIA Rail operates today and Amtrak operates over most of its network. The maximum speed is up to about 160 kilometres per hour, and most of the services are operated on joint infrastructure with the freight rail lines. The top speed would be the speed between the corridors that don't have a lot of stops, where the trains can go fairly quickly.

Higher-speed rail is in the middle, between the conventional and the high-speed rail. It's really about improving the conventional service to a somewhat higher speed, going from about 160 kilometres per hour up to a maximum of 240 kilometres per hour. That usually can be accomplished with the same infrastructure as the freight railways, but there would have to be, in some cases, portions of track that would allow the passenger trains to go more quickly.

Then when we talk about high-speed rail, we are really talking about anything from 200 kilometres per hour and over. In most of the systems around the world, there are big variations. The European high-speed trains tend to travel at around the high 200s and 300s, with some of them getting close to 400 kilometres per hour. These systems are usually dedicated rights of way and are electrified, so there is no sharing of tracks with the freight rail systems. The corridor has to be totally separate for safety reasons, because a train would not be able to stop very quickly.

High-speed rail has been looked at fairly frequently over, I would say, the last 20 or so years. We, the Government of Canada, with the governments of Ontario and Quebec, studied the electrified version of high-speed rail in quite a lot of depth back in 1992 to 1995. That study was completed in 1995. We've provided you with a copy of the final report. Basically it looked at the technical and economic feasibility of that service between Windsor and Quebec City.

The study included pretty significant assessments. It was a compilation of studies looking at possible routing options, detailed traffic forecasts and the shifts between the modes, the construction costs, a review of possible technologies that were available at around that time, and operational characteristics—that is, how the service would have to operate, as well as the costs of operating a service and any required subsidies for that.

The study also looked at the socio-economic impact, and the industrial/economic, urban, and environmental impacts, as well as the impact on other modes. Also included was a potential industrial strategy to look at whether it was possible that high-speed rail service could generate other activity. Most importantly, it looked at a financial analysis, including financing options and a cost-benefit analysis.

Since that study, other studies have been undertaken by private entities, including, for example, Bombardier and SNC-Lavalin. There were other proposals submitted. Those were private proposals, I would say, so they would have to come from those entities who did the studies.

More recently in 2003, VIA put forward a proposal that has been referred to as VIAFast. It was a higher-speed rail proposal—that is, for between 160 and 240 kilometres per hour. That study was assessed by us and VIA. The option was really to provide a slightly faster service than what VIA is operating today in the corridor between Windsor and Quebec City.

• (1540)

In January 2008, former minister Cannon agreed with his colleagues in Ontario and Quebec that perhaps it was time to revisit the high-speed rail file, and we agreed to jointly update the studies that were done from 1992 to 1995. So we have now embarked on those studies. The actual work began in February of this year and is expected to take a little bit over a year to complete, so the studies will not be completed until early 2010.

We did provide, by the way, the request for proposal document that was tendered for the consulting firm that was selected, and in it you will find the various elements that are going to be looked at in more detail, the kinds of things we're going to be looking at. In summary, we will once again review the high-speed rail technologies

that are available. There has been an enormous evolution in high-speed rail technology in the past 15 years. There are lots more options today than there were back then.

Also, we must consider the possible routing options and look at what was looked at before or anything else that may serve as an option for today. We are going to update the transportation demand forecast. This is a critical piece of work. I'll say that this is the driver of the whole study. We need to understand what the possible ridership would be for such a service and where that ridership would be coming from.

We will also update the implementation costs, the capital and the construction costs, as well as assess the operating costs for such a service. We will analyze, I will say, in more detail perhaps than the 1992-1995 study, the environmental and social impacts. This has become a pretty significant concern more recently, given the climate change impacts and the clean air objectives of the three governments.

Also, we will redo the financial and economic analysis. The objective is to look at opportunities for private sector involvement in such a service, and we will look at whether or not a public-private partnership could help make this more affordable. We've also expanded a couple of areas that weren't looked at in 1992 and 1995. We're looking at the institutional framework, the governance types of regimes for other high-speed rail experiences across the world. How do those function? What kind of entities are they? Are they private or public-private? Are they crown corporations? Are they an arm of a government department? It will be things like that. We'll review implementation scenarios, whether or not you do a phased approach or do everything all at once. We'll offer suggestions on how that might go.

We have to assess the impact on the other modes. This is always a very important and controversial issue. You will probably hear this if you're planning to invite some witnesses. Then they'll provide some conclusions and recommendations on what might need to be next or how to proceed from there.

As I said, the study is expected to be completed early in 2010.

Thank you.

• (1545)

The Chair: Mr. Volpe.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Thanks a lot, Ms. Borges and Mr. Lawless, for coming here to share that with us. It's a good summary, and I thank you for it.

I've got one question. I hope you don't think it's too forward. After all those studies, why has a decision not come to get started?

Ms. Helena Borges: To get started in terms of construction? As I said, we just launched the update of those studies. The situation has evolved considerably since 1992-1995. We have more population in the corridor than we did before. The technology options have evolved significantly. As well, there are changes in the other modes. If you recall at that time, we had a slightly different airline structure than we do today, and people, I think, are changing their attitudes. We know Canadians are still highly dependent on automobiles, and that's probably the mode of preference, but I think more and more we're seeing a shift toward greater use of public transportation, whether it's urban transit or rail. Even VIA has been experiencing a little bit of growth on its passenger rail services.

So we need to make sure we are current in these studies. This would be a huge undertaking, and we want to make sure we're looking at everything that needs to be looked at.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Surely you've thought in terms of parcelling this particular project, rather than going over the entire length of the corridor right off the bat, to do the corridor in stages. But you didn't mention that in your introduction.

Ms. Helena Borges: I did in terms of the implementation scenarios. I think we have to look at the whole corridor in terms of the ridership and the cost, but in terms of how you would implement, what would make more sense, we've asked the consultants for advice on that. Are there segments of the corridor that probably would lend themselves to implementation faster? Is there more ridership, more return on the corridor versus their looking at the whole thing? You could do it in blocks or you could do it altogether. We'd like to have all the information.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Doing it in chunks, in segments, would have a big impact on the amount of money that has to flow out of the treasury, whether it's the federal, Ontario or Quebec, or the private sector treasury. There has been a series of estimates about how much this would cost, predicated on a variety of issues. One of them is that the overall amount is prohibitive, and I think you said yes, it's a huge undertaking.

I think the last study that was done by the three governments indicated that you probably wouldn't be spending very much money in the first couple of years, because you would be looking at land assembly plus the studies, etc., and you would be spending somewhere in the vicinity of \$50 million to \$100 million in just doing that, and that's it. Has that ever been one of the constraining factors associated with actually implementing or getting into high-speed train travel?

Ms. Helena Borges: Are you asking about the total cost, or the upfront costs?

Hon. Joseph Volpe: I mean the total cost.

Ms. Helena Borges: The last study, the 1992-95 one, concluded that to implement high-speed rail from Quebec to Windsor would cost \$18 billion. That is a very large investment, and that was an estimate.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: But in fairness, it's over a 10-year period. I guess my question is, if it were \$18 billion over a 10-year period and you said for the sake of simplicity that it meant about \$1.8 billion per year, not all of it coming out of the federal treasury, does that money

create an inhibiting factor on the part of the Department of Transport?

Ms. Helena Borges: We currently would not have that kind of revenue to fund this kind of project. It is something that would have to be allocated in future budgets.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: I guess the department and the minister wouldn't have the \$1.8 billion as discretionary amounts, but assuming that it were all located in the federal treasury....

Let me put the question a little differently, Ms. Borges. I don't mean to put you on the spot, but it's a general policy question. Has the department ever thought about making a presentation to the cabinet through the Department of Finance for its portion of that \$1.8 billion?

• (1550)

Ms. Helena Borges: I don't know whether in the past that was done, but maybe I can clarify one thing that's really important. I deal with many infrastructure projects, so let me take this opportunity to present to you a bit of a sequencing of what happens.

This study, for example, which will be done by early next year, is going to be a feasibility study. It's a key study in helping inform the governments as to whether they want to proceed. But after that study, there are significant other studies that have to be completed.

One of them would be an environmental assessment study. We probably have to do one, because this study is going to look at possible routing options. We would have to define what the exact routing is going to be. Just doing that can be quite a challenge, because you have to identify which properties are required. Remember that if you're looking at high-speed, you can't choose the existing rail corridor in place today; you're going to be looking at building a whole new corridor. It could be on the same alignment or not. Those are all costs.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Just to clarify that a bit, you mean that you can't use the same rails. But the corridor may be large enough for dedicating different rails; in other words, for expanding the use of a corridor that's already there. The environmental assessment in that regard would probably not be required.

Ms. Helena Borges: No, it would definitely be required. There are rules in the Canadian Transportation Act about any infrastructure improvements for rail and about when an environmental assessment is required, and the exemption is very limited: it's within a three-kilometre maximum length and within 300 metres of the right of way. This definitely exceeds three kilometres. Something like this, as I mentioned, has to be fully grade-separated, so there would be large amounts of bridge structures, large amounts of grade separations, all affecting various communities. All of that would require environmental assessment work to be completed, and that in and of itself could take a few years and would take significant funds to do.

Then there are the detailed engineering studies about what you're going to do in terms of the construction: the constructability of it, the actual routing of it. You then also need to start looking more in depth at the technology options, because what this study is going to say is that there are such and such possible technologies that could be suited for a Canadian environment and could be adapted to operate in Canada, but you would want to get more precise information on them.

So there would be a lot of upfront work that would be fairly costly and would be necessary, in effect, to make a final decision on where it should go.

The Chair: We're way past the time.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Are you going to give me a chance to come back?

The Chair: Absolutely.

Monsieur Laframboise.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Laframboise (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, BQ): Ms. Borges, I have read the 1995 study and looked at the 2008 study proposal that you submitted. You gave a bit of background and said that there had been other studies as well.

When did Bombardier and SNC-Lavalin conduct a study?

Ms. Helena Borges: I believe it was in 1998.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Right. There was VIA Fast in 2003. You do not want to make it public, because you say you would have to ask VIA before releasing it.

Ms. Helena Borges: Yes, it contains confidential information about the two railway companies. That is why the report is confidential.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Right.

I would not want us to make the same mistakes in our next study as we made in previous studies. I say that because it is clear from the 1995 study that the environment was not a problem at the time. It was not the primary concern. What the study mainly did was estimate the costs at \$18 billion for a ridership that did not justify such an investment. Moreover, there was no in-depth analysis with respect to development. I am looking at the recommendations in this report. It says that the impact on tourism and so on would be negligible. There was no market study.

I say that because Spain did not make that mistake. It conducted a study of the economic potential to justify its investment, with the fantastic results it has today. Spain owes its recovery to high speed rail.

We do not get the feeling that this is what the study here is looking to do. The 1995 study focused on costs and impacts on other areas. High speed rail would have hurt air travel, which would have shrunk by roughly 44%. The study did not look ahead. It saw the future through a rear-view mirror, and there was a desire not to hurt other types of industries. There was no in-depth analysis of future potential.

I feel that the study, which you have funded to the tune of \$1 million with Quebec, Ottawa and Ontario, is once again about

facts. The environment has become an important issue, which was not the case in 1995, and the study is going to take it into consideration. But the Americans have just announced significant investments in a network that would be connected to Canada. I would say that the Americans have embraced a truly proactive vision, and we have nothing that ties in with what they are doing.

In a sense, we still have the same old strategy. Reassure me. Is this really the aim of the study, or are you going to try to be a bit more open to future development?

• (1555)

Ms. Helena Borges: I would refer you to page 13 of the request for proposal. Section 9, which talks about environmental and social impact analysis, is a very important aspect of this study, in our opinion. We have asked the consultant to look at this in detail. We want to have a better understanding of how such a service will affect the environment and Canadians' community life. We also want to know whether economic and social opportunities can be developed thanks to high speed rail service. In Europe, cities that are far from urban centres can engage in other economic activities and create a new economy thanks to that. We want the consultant to look at that.

Urban congestion is also a very important issue to us. I think that one of the main reasons the two provinces want to study this proposal again is the congestion in the major urban centres of Montreal and Toronto. We want to see whether people can be encouraged to take high speed trains instead of their own cars. The two provinces and the department are already investing heavily in urban transit, with companies such as AMT and GO Transit. We want to see how this system could be connected with the urban systems and the airports. This part of the study will be more detailed than the former study. This is very important to us.

I want to correct one thing, and that is the impression left by the American announcement. We will send you the American press release. The truth is that they announced \$8 billion in investments in 10 corridors. These corridors are very short. The longest is 500 miles in length, I believe. It is not like the corridor here in Canada. However, \$8 billion for 10 corridors is not very much. Those who wish can submit proposals for these corridors, and if projects to improve the existing corridors are ready to go, then the money will go to them. It is not really HSR, but a way to improve existing services. Perhaps, ultimately, it will be possible to launch a new high speed rail service. When you think about it, it comes down to less than \$1 billion per corridor, which is not very much.

• (1600)

Mr. Mario Laframboise: But it is a start. The Americans have the financial capacity to do much more.

Ms. Helena Borges: Yes.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: They will be able to when their economy recovers, Ms. Borges.

Page 13 of the document refers to environmental and social impact analysis. This includes looking at components, previous studies such as drainage basins, land use, noise, congestion and safety. As you know, that is important to economic development.

Even section 11 on page 13, which refers to economic and financial analysis, talks more about public-private partnerships. There is no long-term vision. I hope I am wrong, because it is necessary to have a long-term vision about this development. We must not just consider current potential. We have to look at the enormous future potential. I do not sense that. I am telling you, even though you refer me to this page—I did not want to bring this up right away—I sense a constraint.

I sat on the Standing Committee on Transport when the VIA Fast project was submitted in 2003, and the Liberals were quite divided on VIA Fast. There were those who wanted it and those who did not. The project died because of those who did not want it. The battle was fought. We will see what the study concludes. I hope we will have the opportunity to read the analysis. There was this fight within the Liberal Party that I feel is not yet over. Time will tell. Interest is all well and good, but when the Liberals are in power, things change.

[English]

Hon. Joseph Volpe: I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: I have Mr. Volpe on a point of order, and then I'm going to Mr. Bevington.

Go ahead, Mr. Volpe.

[Translation]

Hon. Joseph Volpe: If the Liberals were divided at the time, it was because they had not yet seen the virtues of the alliance with the Bloc to develop Canadian industry. Now that we have the same goal, we are much better able to do positive things. I appreciate what Mr. Laframboise is saying, but it is not something Ms. Borges can comment on in turn. I hope she will resist the temptation.

[English]

Mr. Brian Jean: Mr. Chair, on the same point of order, I just want to say very quickly that there are a lot fewer Liberals here now, so proportionately there's a better chance that they're going to be united.

The Chair: That was not a point of order.

I'll go to Mr. Bevington.

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): That wasn't even a very good observation.

Thank you, Madam Borges.

I'm a little curious. I read the study as well, and the study suggested that the higher-speed rail in 1995 was not very different from the high-speed rail. You were dedicating a line. Is that the same approach VIA took with its VIAFast?

Ms. Helena Borges: No, the VIAFast would have continued on the same track, sharing it with the freight railways.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: We could assume that the capital cost would be quite a bit lower.

Ms. Helena Borges: The capital cost was quite a bit lower. In fact, some of the money that was announced in the 2009 budget, and actually in 2007, is going to get close to producing similar results—having portions of the track triple-tracked, trying to deal with bottlenecks in certain key areas—and that will help reduce times and improve the speed somewhat.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: What are you anticipating the speed improvement to be? Will it be 10%, 15%, 20%?

• (1605)

Ms. Helena Borges: It's going to depend on the segment. In terms of outcome or the trip-time benefit, VIA is planning to introduce a couple of express trains that would have fewer stops. They would reduce the total trip time between Montreal and Toronto by half an hour.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: It would be half an hour, okay. It's not really a tremendous amount.

Ms. Helena Borges: No, it's quite difficult when you're sharing the same infrastructure and you don't have a grade-separated right-of-way. It limits what you can travel at.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: One thing I didn't see in the 1995 study was how building a new set of tracks, a new transportation system, affected the capital cost of every other transportation system we have. If we're going to add a new system, what does that do to airport expansions? What does that do to highway expansions? What does that do to the freight rail system, which now has a track dedicated to freight rail? Are those things that you're now putting in the new study, to give us an idea of how this relationship between the infrastructure investments works?

Ms. Helena Borges: Yes. In fact, the 1992-1995 looked at the impact of the traffic on the other passenger modes, right? Are you referring to the infrastructure costs of the other modes, or is it funding levels?

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Well, it is expanding infrastructure, expanding airports, and expanding highway systems.

Ms. Helena Borges: Right. It will look at that. I'll say that it'll look at the impact. Task 12 of the study will look at the impact of reducing road congestion by reducing automobile trips. So that deals with the highway mode. How many cars...?

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Will you actually put a dollar figure on the reduction of capital costs for other transportation systems?

Ms. Helena Borges: It would be difficult to do that until we know.... For example, take the highway system. On the highway system, people aren't paying for its use; it's paid for through general revenues. The highway will still have to be there. It's shared by cars and trucks. It isn't necessarily a high-speed rail system that would take a lot of the traffic off.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: But it may mean that you'll need less development of approachways. You'll look at less maintenance over the years and longer replacement time for highway components.

You talk about regional airport expansions that might be avoided. I remember seeing a very good program on television about eight months ago about the airport congestion that everybody's anticipating in this corridor, which is going to require massive capital investment to accomplish.

So if you have a new transportation system, how is it going to affect the other capital investments that are going to be made in the region? You can't take this in isolation, in other words.

Ms. Helena Borges: No. And we are looking at the impact on the passengers who would no longer be using those modes. But as I say, that does not necessarily translate into direct capital cost avoidance, because a system of this nature is serving very targeted markets.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: You're serving a regional market. You're moving people from Toronto to Montreal, just as the airports are.

Ms. Helena Borges: Right, except that the airport will still be serving other regional flights—it's a hub-and-spoke type of system—plus international flights. Right?

Mr. Dennis Bevington: I use the airport. I know that a great number of the flights are on particular routes. And the anticipated growth, according to the program I was watching.... It was a very in-depth program. I'd recommend it to you, if you haven't seen it already. The sense of the requirement of expansion of airports for regional carriers, will that be reduced by putting in a completely new rail transportation system?

Ms. Helena Borges: As I say, part of the study is looking at the potential for diversion of traffic. Once you have that, then, yes, we could look at those impacts. Some of them are probably going to be really difficult to calculate, extremely difficult to calculate, in particular road.

On the freight side, the railways will still need the track for their freight service. Today they're shared. VIA contributes to some of that whenever VIA wants to improve its service, but the railways maintain them. Governments don't pay for them.

• (1610)

Mr. Dennis Bevington: There's no expansion anticipated with freight rail traffic in this region?

Ms. Helena Borges: Yes, so they would have to continue investing in that. This high-speed rail system would get the passengers off those tracks, in fact.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: So you'd free up more time on those rails for—

Ms. Helena Borges: For freight.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: —freight. Therefore, you would slow down a requirement for expansion of that system.

Ms. Helena Borges: It may or may not. Railways haven't done expansions in a long time.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: When you're trying to set an economic course for a country, you have to look at all the aspects of it; otherwise, you don't get a clear picture.

Ms. Helena Borges: I take note of your comment.

We are trying to understand what the impact is on the traffic, on congestion, as I mentioned, the impact on VIA Rail, because we do have a current passenger rail operator. What's the impact on VIA? What's the impact on the bus carriers? What's the impact on the airlines, the airports? We are trying to do that assessment.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: I guess the other thing you'll look at is the added value the transportation system brings to the passengers, to the movement of passengers.

Ms. Helena Borges: Yes. That's part of what I was commenting on to Mr. Laframboise, the environmental, social, and economic impacts of doing something like this. Does it open up new

possibilities in terms of economic development opportunities for places in between, let's say places like Kingston? If you have faster service between Kingston and Toronto, or for that matter anywhere else in the corridor, does that open up new kinds of mobility and employment opportunities that weren't there before? We want to analyze that.

The Chair: I have to go to Ms. Brown. We're well over.

Thank you.

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank our presenter. I really enjoyed going through this. I am a GTA member of Parliament, and as often as I am able, I do make use of VIA Rail and find it a very advantageous way to travel. I get lots of work done on the train, and I thoroughly enjoy the travel.

Having done extensive travel, I have had the opportunity to use the high-speed rail in Tokyo, and I've also had the opportunity to use the high-speed rail in France, between Paris and Strasbourg. It's a wonderful mode of travel.

One of the things this report said was that air carriers could lose 44% of their projected corridor ridership in 2005. So this is picking up a little bit from where Mr. Bevington was. In these studies, have we looked at any of the things that have gone on in Europe? I would suggest that this is probably a very dated comment. We've seen extensive change in Ontario, particularly with the advent of new airline carriers coming out of Toronto, the movement of another airline carrier from York region to London, servicing London to Ottawa. Could you make any comment on that? I know that this will be part of what you're saying.

Maybe I'll just lump all of my questions into one, and then I'll let you address them.

You were talking about the increasing opportunity for travel, and I think that's a very important part of this study. Looking at corridors, right now we're talking about Montreal to Toronto. Is there any possibility that corridor option might include York Region? I obviously have a vested interest in seeing it service York Region. Because we have hydro corridors, for instance, that already come through many of these areas, is there any opportunity to make use of those corridors that already exist?

My third question is this. We're only looking at Windsor to Quebec at this point. Would there be any extension of this study into Calgary to Edmonton? Are we looking at other areas in the country?

I'm sorry, I've kind of lumped them all into one.

Ms. Helena Borges: That's no problem.

We agree with you that the conclusion of the 1992-1995 study is probably dated—we think; we don't know. As I said before, probably the most essential piece of the study we're going to be doing is to understand how ridership has evolved and how the modal behaviour of people will change.

What we're going to be doing is what we call surveys of passengers' stated preference and revealed preference surveys. A passenger today may be taking a car, a plane, or a bus. We want to understand, given certain scenarios in terms of travel time and convenience of the trip, whether they would make the shift, and why or why not. This will help us then determine what would be the possible shift from one mode to the other mode. Whether it stays at 44% or goes higher or lower, we'll see, but that's a key piece. That then helps us determine what the complete ridership would be on the corridor. And the corridor we're looking at is Quebec to Windsor.

Your second question was about routing and existing corridors. We have asked the consultants, taking into account the ridership, what the options would be for routing that would take advantage of that ridership potential. You want to make sure you're capturing in the routing the big pockets of potential ridership, or that you have good connections to them.

We have asked them to look at existing corridors, whether the existing corridor that VIA uses today, which is a CN line, in effect, or the CP corridor, which is north of that, or other corridors—highway corridors, or others such as you mentioned, such as hydro corridors. We haven't limited them. We've asked them to identify the corridors based on the use of the system. We'll see what they come back with.

To the extent that they are existing corridors, this fact makes it easier, because as Mr. Volpe said, it's on an existing line. There is already development on it; this could help expedite things. At the same time, the population has shifted a lot. You know what has happened in Toronto, that many of the commuters are now north and not south of the 401. We have to look at that.

The other important thing is connectivity to the transit systems. We want to make sure, wherever this routing is, that when you're getting close to urban areas there is good connectivity between the rail and intercity rail service, and then the local commuter rail service or light rail services, or even air-rail link services. That will be taken into account as well. One of the things we learned from the European experience is that if you have a good connection, people will take it. If you have to switch modes altogether, then people tend to not get on the mode if they have to keep switching.

You asked about looking at other routings. We participated, back in 2004, with the Van Horne Institute in Calgary together with the Province of Alberta, in looking at a high-level feasibility study for high-speed rail between Edmonton and Calgary. That study recommended two possible scenarios, similar to what's been going on here: that you use an existing shared corridor with CP Rail or a whole new corridor. Of course, the costs vary, depending on the scenario.

They did not at that time do what we call a market type of ridership assessment, so the province, we understand, has been looking at that. I don't think they've issued any study yet. We've not involved in it, but the province was going further into certain elements of the earlier study to look at the opportunities for doing it.

Other than those two...right now, those are the only high-speed rail looks that have happened.

•(1615)

Ms. Lois Brown: Do I have another moment?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Ms. Lois Brown: Just looking at what has gone on in Europe—with the availability of high-speed rail there between many of their urban centres, they have also implemented air buses from a lot of the airports as well—do you think the competition is going to be a bad thing for other modes of transportation?

Ms. Helena Borges: We believe in competition; we believe in choice. The fundamental difference between Canada and Europe is the population density. We are a very sparsely populated country, even in urban areas, compared with Europe. And we have huge corridors to cover. None of the U.S. corridors is over 500 miles, while this one is...how long, Kevin?

Mr. Kevin Lawless (Senior Strategic Policy and Special Project Officer, Surface Transportation Policy, Department of Transport): It's 1,200.

Ms. Helena Borges: So it's huge, and the population is not very big. That's where they have the advantage that you can get people to take the train, and the train is used heavily for many purposes, right?

They have also been a bit creative in looking at other policies, that where certain flights, short-haul flights, are now not permitted between certain cities, the train becomes the mode. You have the bus, you have your car, but planes may not be permitted.

When we looked at this, and looking at the governance model, the sort of policy mould for this, we've asked to look at that. Are there things we need to think about in Canada if we want to make this more attractive, a sort of similar experience to Europe? Ultimately, we just don't have the population density they do in the United States or in Europe. That's a reality.

•(1620)

The Chair: Thank you.

I might even add that there may be an opportunity for markets that have been abandoned by the airlines or other transportation. I think the comment for western Canada is that there's a lot of need out there and a lot of opportunity that I hope we don't overlook.

Mr. Dhaliwal, I know you're going to share your time with Mr. Kennedy.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Newton—North Delta, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Borges and Mr. Lawless.

President Obama has come up with a plan: the Pacific northwest corridor from Oregon to Seattle to Vancouver. Looking at Vancouver to the border, that's a very short segment of that corridor. Have you followed up on that proposal? Have you also done the cost-benefit study on that particular portion of the fast track?

Ms. Helena Borges: We have not.

Amtrak has talked to us in the past. It's Amtrak that actually operates that service. VIA Rail does not.

They are going to, or are planning to, introduce a couple or at least one more train for the Olympics, possibly two more trains in that corridor. They've done some improvements to facilitate that, but we haven't done any studies between Vancouver and Seattle.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: The other issue you mentioned is that you did a study in 1995, and there have been technological developments since then. What is the impact of these new technologies or technological developments on the feasibility of this fast train between these two cities, Windsor and Quebec?

Ms. Helena Borges: What we think will be the impact...and we don't know for sure, but given that there is a much broader range of technologies available today than there was in 1992 or 1995, we'll have better choices, say, that are suited to the Canadian environment. Also, we're hoping that because of these developments—I don't know if I'll say it—the costs have come down, but there would be more competition in the supplier market in terms of the available technologies. Also, the speeds have improved, so you're probably able to do a better quality of service.

So the technological advancements will hopefully play in favour of a new service and give us much more choice. We do have to keep in mind that Canada, having a northern climate, does have requirements that certain services may not have in Europe, because of the climate effects and things like that.

Those are the kinds of factors that will be taken into account, but there has been—I won't say an explosion—quite a large development of new technologies in the marketplace.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you.

It's back to Mr. Kennedy.

Mr. Gerard Kennedy: About the American experience, is there a good anticipation by you, as responsible folks within the federal government, about whether the latest American initiative will put us out of sync with any level of cooperation and about what the impacts might be?

There seems to be a bigger bite that they're taking: \$8 billion is part of their recovery program, a billion dollars a year. What is your view today about what that does to fast rail? Are there opportunities for Canada that we need to be very alert to right now?

Ms. Helena Borges: We keep a very close eye on what happens in the U.S., just as they do on us.

I'm even pleased to tell you that two years ago, when Amtrak was looking at expanding its service and changing its network, the model they were looking at was VIA Rail. They came and talked to us, and we shared information with them and planning.

VIA Rail cooperates with Amtrak. For example, into Buffalo-Toronto, they meet at the border and "swap passengers"—if you want to call it that—swap cars. We are keeping a very close eye. A lot of the investments this government is making in VIA Rail, in fact, are going to get to a lot of the same improvements that we think are going to happen in the U.S. As I've said, there are 10 corridors, and \$8 billion sounds like a lot but isn't that much when you're looking at how many corridors there are.

The improvements at this point probably aren't going to make significant changes. If they have, they do have a long-term plan. We

don't know the details of that yet, but perhaps with the additional funding, they may be able to do more, but wherever there is opportunity, both VIA and Amtrak talk to each other a lot. We would try to coordinate to make sure passengers have fluidity.

Four of the corridors, by the way, if you do get a chance, are corridors that could tie into the Canadian system: in Montreal, in Buffalo-Toronto, Windsor-Detroit, and then Vancouver-Seattle.

• (1625)

Mr. Gerard Kennedy: That's my key concern. Our investment is \$13 billion, and if we're looking only at the infrastructure stimulus investment, it's not proportionately as large, but I'm not completely worried about that. It's perhaps going to stimulate industry response and so on, and will we lose out? How do we stay very focused? We've had companies in Canada building high-speed rail everywhere else but not here. Have any of those things been taken into account?

My view is that a year delay on the study is a little bit unfortunate, given a number of things. One of them is the confluence of the need for infrastructure building. By not having a plan ready to go, we're somewhat disadvantaged.

Maybe you could tell us this. Have the Americans got a plan that's ready to go? In other words, when they talk about \$13 billion of investment, are those pieces that will fit a high-speed rail, or are they just going to contribute towards options? What is your sense of that?

Ms. Helena Borges: Like you, we've read a lot of the material and we've had a couple of discussions with officials at the Department of Transportation. Our understanding is that they will be doing a call for proposals. So the proposals are on three levels. There are projects that are ready to roll and could get into the ground in the next year or so. They may or may not be high-speed rail projects; they will be passenger rail projects that may be part of these corridors or may be part of their regional service.

Then in the next round.... And I don't know when the first round will be; we assume it will be this year, but we don't know for sure. The next round could be next year or could be the year after that. Then they're going to start looking at these more comprehensive proposals for the corridors.

You mentioned \$13 billion. So far only \$8 billion is approved. The other \$5 billion is still to be—

Mr. Gerard Kennedy: There's \$5 billion.

Ms. Helena Borges: Yes, the President is planning to put it in his budget bill, but that isn't approved funding yet and probably won't be until the fall, if it is.

The Chair: Mr. Pomerleau.

[Translation]

Mr. Roger Pomerleau (Drummond, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I will be sharing my time with Mr. Laframboise.

Thank you for being here, Ms. Borges. My question concerns my riding. I live halfway between Quebec City and Montreal, in Drummondville. We have very good conventional service, and people are happy with it. The train stops at all the little towns on its route. I can get the people in my riding to accept the idea that an HSR line is going to be built somewhere other than in our riding, provided that I am sure that the conventional service will not be affected and will continue to be offered.

Am I to understand that if the project were carried out, this HSR service would be offered in parallel to the existing conventional service?

Ms. Helena Borges: I cannot say right now. We do not know where the new train will go, whether it will have a direct impact on the current VIA Rail service, whether the route will be the same or whether we will need conventional service and high speed rail service.

Mr. Roger Pomerleau: If it is elsewhere, we can assume that—

Ms. Helena Borges: Yes, we will have to make that decision later and assess how many passengers use the service already, whether there is significant ridership. It is too early to say.

Mr. Roger Pomerleau: Okay. If necessary, I could tell my constituents that either they will have HSR or the HSR will be elsewhere and they will keep the conventional service they love.

Ms. Helena Borges: It is too early to say. I cannot answer.

Mr. Roger Pomerleau: It is too early to say. Okay.

Ms. Helena Borges: Yes.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Except that in the case of Drummondville, if it were on the north shore, on the other side of the river, it would not be in the same corridor at all.

Ms. Helena Borges: It is too early to say.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: In your presentation, you said that the airline industry had changed since 1995. What did you mean?

Ms. Helena Borges: In 1995, there were two national airlines: Air Canada and Canadian Airlines. There were also a number of other carriers, such as Nordair and Air Atlantic. People had more choice than they do today. Today, there is Air Canada and, on a few routes, there is WestJet. Other airlines also offer other routes. There is significant consolidation of the airline industry, which can have an impact on travellers' choice of mode of transportation.

• (1630)

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Delays can also be a factor. Since 1995, a number of security measures have been introduced in airports, causing delays.

Ms. Helena Borges: Yes. That is very important. Currently, when someone takes a plane, they have to arrive an hour in advance, then the trip itself may take an hour or an hour and a half, and it can take a long time to get out of the airport. It is important to compare the full length of a train trip to that of a plane trip. In my opinion, the two are starting to be more comparable than 15 years ago.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: You started by defining the three types of rail service. The 1995 study found that there was not much difference in the development costs for higher speed rail and high speed rail, likely because of the condition of the rails. The study concluded that only high speed rail proposals should be analyzed. That was the conclusion.

Has work been done on the rails so that higher speed rail would have a greater likelihood of happening today, or are the objectives still the same?

Ms. Helena Borges: At present, we are looking at high speed trains. We are investing in a higher speed system with VIA Rail, but there are limits. A higher speed system always involves cost sharing. That is the problem. I think we will see great improvements with the investments VIA Rail is starting to make. It will take a little time, but I think it is a way to see whether VIA Rail can improve the trip and its service quality and whether more people will want to take the train instead of flying or driving.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: In your opinion, how long will it take for VIA Rail to complete its improvements?

Ms. Helena Borges: It will take three to five years.

[English]

The Chair: *Merci.*

Mr. Mayes.

Mr. Colin Mayes (Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Brian Jean: Just as a point of order, Mr. Chair, I just found out I have a speech in the House on Bill C-7 at five o'clock, and I spoke to Mr. Volpe about this. I was wondering if we could have consent to deal with my motion at this stage. We have had some discussions in relation to possible options on the motion and a friendly amendment.

Is that possible?

The Chair: If it's the will of the committee.

Mr. Brian Jean: I apologize to the witnesses for that, but it shouldn't take more than a few minutes. I would like to move a motion, and I'll read it into the record in English:

That, given complaints voiced by air travelers, the Motions and Private Members' Business from parties, and the recent actions taken by some airlines, the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities conduct a detailed study to compare the potential economic and consumer impacts of these measures with international norms and practices. The study will evaluate these options with respect to service levels and protection for consumers, the practical impact on air service providers and on Canadian jobs and competitiveness.

The Chair: Comments?

Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, I'm sure the committee members are well aware that a private member's bill, Bill C-310, is in front of the House and we are going to vote on that tomorrow. And once this bill is either voted down or is voted for, and the committee does its work, then we'll do the study part of that bill anyway, so I don't see that there is any need to have a motion of this kind at this time, when we have a private member's bill coming to us as a committee. We'll do our job there.

Mr. Brian Jean: May I respond to that, Mr. Chair, just very quickly.

I have had the opportunity to review letters and particular issues that have been brought forward by some thirty carriers that service Canada that are not in favour of this particular bill—and it's obviously Bill C-310—including many other stakeholders, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, and so on. And in fact, I'm from a northern community, like some of the members here, and I've had particular discussions with Air Canada and WestJet in relation to concerns about many of the airports in northern Canada shutting down and isolating communities as a result of this. Many of the air carriers do not service communities in Newfoundland and other areas because of, quite frankly, compensation and cancellation issues with this particular bill if it is passed. This is of real concern, especially to Newfoundland, and I have some 35,000 Newfoundlanders in my particular riding, and those airlines are telling me that they will not service many of the cities in Newfoundland during the entire winter because of this particular bill, if it's passed, and the issues with snow and snowfall.

So I do believe this bill has particular ramifications, and my proposal is basically not only to study Bill C-310 but also to study the economic impact to Air Canada and particularly rural communities and, in fact, service providers. So that's why I brought forward the motion.

• (1635)

Hon. Joseph Volpe: I think concern has been expressed by all members around the table regarding Bill C-310. So while I haven't had an opportunity to rewrite any of the things, I hope that Mr. Jean, on behalf of the government, will accept what I take in a friendly fashion, and maybe we can deal with this very expeditiously.

If you don't mind, I'll read it out, and maybe the clerk can tell me whether it's in order or not. It may be the will of the committee to accept the intent of it the way I read it. I haven't had an opportunity to make the changes in French. Monsieur Laframboise, I hope you will bear with me.

I'm not sure that I want to use “given the complaints”, but:

That, given that this committee has received concerns by air travellers, given the motion passed in the House unanimously, and given the private member's Bill C-310, which may come to this committee in the next 48 hours, the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, as part of its study on Bill C-310, include a comparison of the potential economic and consumer impacts of these measures with international norms and practices.

Further, that the committee evaluate these impacts with respect to service levels, protection for consumers, air service providers, and on Canadian jobs and competitiveness.

I apologize if the grammar isn't completely perfect, given this, but I hope that the parliamentary secretary will take that comment. I think that on behalf of their parties, Monsieur Laframboise and Mr. Bevington will accept that we're trying to expand what will happen.

Mr. Brian Jean: Exactly.

The Chair: Is there any other comment? Go ahead, Mr. Kennedy.

Mr. Gerard Kennedy: I just wanted assurance from the parliamentary secretary, since he is steering this motion, that this is not about sandbagging or inordinately delaying Bill C-310.

It is coming to this committee. It is a little unusual for us to be in anticipation of the will of the House. We are not trying to be in contempt of the House, but if we are thinking it is coming, we would ordinarily deal with it as that business arises and then set parameters for a study. It is a little unusual to have that done ahead of time. We don't have the benefit of the will of the House or of some of the final discussions of the House with respect to this bill.

We want to make sure that we aren't setting up unequal terms that don't follow the spirit of the bill.

[Translation]

All the members of the committee want to have a good discussion on the issue associated with this bill, but I hope that the committee will study it fairly and quickly. I intend to support a motion if the government gives that assurance.

[English]

Mr. Brian Jean: Mr. Chair, I would like to quickly respond to that.

With the current economic conditions, the global crisis, the uncertainty in the marketplace over the past period of time, the tremendous impact that the airline industry has on Canada and Canadian travellers, especially given that our population density of approximately 1.1 to 1.2 people per square mile is the lowest in the world, the major concern of the government is that this particular motion could cause additional uncertainty if it is passed as it is, despite all the concern raised by the airlines. That is my concern and that is the government's concern.

Mr. Kennedy, because a lot of people are listening to this particular motion and a lot of people are paying particular attention to Bill C-310, I want to ensure that all parties and all listeners recognize that this committee is not going to rubber-stamp it. I want to make sure they recognize that this committee is going to give it due consideration, look at all the international norms and practices, and apply a good opinion back to the House on that basis.

That is the concern.

• (1640)

Mr. Gerard Kennedy: Mr. Chair, that is what's occasioning the concern. The assurance I'm looking for is simply that we're not going to treat this differently in a procedural sense.

From the parliamentary secretary I clearly hear opposition to the bill as it stands. If he has arrived at a conclusion, I think some of the rest of us would like to study it and its implications. There have been previous bills, and we think there is a public good to be addressed here in terms of finding the right balance of travellers' rights versus any impacts on the industry.

Having heard the language that suggests that you've arrived at a conclusion, I just want the assurance that this committee will be able to arrive at its own decisions without the process getting in the way. For example, the word "detailed" is used. I don't suppose we're putting a specific parameter on it, but I want us to try to operate in a spirit of consensus around this motion that we don't have a notice for.

I'm wondering if I can have the assurance that you want a free and open discussion of this bill and that it is not going to prejudice its outcome in any way.

Mr. Brian Jean: There's no question whatsoever.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Mr. Chairman, even with the amendment from Mr. Volpe, I just don't understand the motive of Mr. Jean in bringing this motion in, when we know that this bill is in front of the House. This is a private member's bill, and unless Mr. Harper suggests that this bill should pass.... Every member has seen this bill.

We are pre-planning things. We should probably wait until tomorrow to see what the outcome of that vote is. Every member is privileged and has been given the mandate to represent their constituents. The way I see it is, we don't want to derail the mandate that the House of Commons gives this bill tomorrow.

I have listened to those concerns as well and have told those airline people as well. I travel with these airlines almost twice a week, and I see that there needs to be some kind of passenger rights that should respect their rights as well. Right now, those are not there. Airlines are willing to come forward with changes now. I'm sure this is long overdue on both sides of the issue, from the airlines' viewpoint and in other cases from the passengers' viewpoint. We have to keep it balanced.

But we should have waited until the vote; then we could have brought this motion forward.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Laframboise: First, we will support the amendment proposed by Mr. Volpe, but I want us to understand each other. I gave the speech on behalf of my party in the House of Commons. All the Bloc Québécois wants is for Bill C-310 to be referred to committee and examined in detail. The advantage of Mr. Jean's motion, as amended by Mr. Volpe, is that it will allow us to get to the bottom of things. I would not want us to rush things. Our intention in supporting Bill C-310 was for it to be referred to committee so that we could discuss it in detail, call witnesses and conduct analyses in order to make a good, fair decision for our airlines. I am okay with that.

But I want to say right away that we will not help rush the bill through. We have no problem with the motion as proposed and as amended by Mr. Volpe. We will conduct a thorough study of this issue, and that is fine. We must make the best decision.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Mayes.

Mr. Colin Mayes: Mr. Chair, where are we now? We've had an amendment presented by Mr. Volpe, and we've had a motion now. So where are we? Is the amendment valid?

The Chair: I'm going to get there.

Mr. Brian Jean: It's accepted as a friendly amendment, absolutely.

•(1645)

The Chair: Mr. Bevington.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: I have that concern as well, that we have to make some delineation of the time we're going to spend on this, just as we do for every other bill.

I'm a little concerned with the word "detailed" as well, and the extent to which we're going to be looking at witnesses coming forward. I suppose we'll have to set those parameters as we get there.

Supporting this motion would not really change the requirement for the committee to meet to discuss how much time we're going to put into this bill. To me, this doesn't really change any of our procedures, because it doesn't outline exactly what "detailed" means.

It suggests there's a study. Does the study take precedence over the movement of the bill through this committee? If we agree to doing a study, are we saying this bill won't progress out of the committee until the study is completed?

Those are my concerns, but I feel that we're still within the purview of the majority of the committee in setting those conditions as we move along.

An hon. member: Call the question.

The Chair: For clarification, with all the comments I've received and that I'm sure committee members have received on this bill, I hope we wouldn't do anything in haste, because I think the decisions we make on this particular bill and this issue are going to impact the industry for a long period of time. I would advise that we take our time and make sure we're fully satisfied at the end of the process that we've accepted the bill or amended it to what is best.

Mr. Gerard Kennedy: Mr. Chair, again for clarification, we're not addressing the work order in this motion. This is of broader intent, and we can all rest assured that we'll come back to the study plan and get to what we want to do.

The Chair: Absolutely.

I'm going to call the question.

I will advise members that I have the next two meetings booked for studying high-speed rail, but we will have a subcommittee sometime in there so that we can finalize where we are going to go with this.

We have a motion put forward by Mr. Jean that has been amended by Mr. Volpe, and the amendment has been accepted as a friendly amendment.

I would ask all those in favour of the amendment of Mr. Volpe to so signify.

(Amendment agreed to)

(Motion as amended agreed to)

An hon. member: Let the record show that it was unanimous.

The Chair: Now we're going to go back to questions of our guests. Where were we?

Mr. Mayes.

Mr. Colin Mayes: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for their patience.

I have three questions.

I spent some time in Japan and I experienced a typhoon there. It was rather interesting. This weather event shut the rail system down for a couple of days. Considering that we live in the great white north, I wonder how reliable high-speed rail is in Canada. Is there a snow/ice conflict with high-speed rail?

That's my first question. Do you want to deal with that one right away?

Ms. Helena Borges: In looking at the technology options we've asked the consultants to consider, that is a real concern for us. We want to make sure that what they're going to come forward with as realistic options are tested technologies. There are countries that maybe don't live in as big a white north as ours, but that are operating in winter conditions in which they have snow and ice. Those might be better. We just want to avoid a new technology that still has to be tested and isn't tried. That's a very real concern for us.

Mr. Colin Mayes: The next question I have is, what is the interest rate threshold on capital invested that would make your model projections work and would be self-sustaining over 30 years? Do you have a threshold?

Ms. Helena Borges: We haven't gotten to that point yet. That's part of the advice on the financial business case that the consultants will be doing for us.

• (1650)

Mr. Colin Mayes: My final question is this. It's important, when you frame corridor plans, to talk with municipalities, because they have to incorporate them in their community plans. Has there been any work at all done with the communities along this corridor?

Ms. Helena Borges: There has not been at this point, because we don't in fact have a corridor yet. Again, it's part of what we're asking the consultants to look at for us. In the study, they're going to look at possible corridor alignments. Until we get to that point, it's difficult to consult, because we don't know what we're consulting on exactly. But I can assure you that VIA Rail reports to us, and the consultations that go on with the communities about service—about the quality of the service, stops, hours of operation, schedules—are intense. I think VIA has pretty good relationships with most of the communities it serves, of which I think there are about 450. So that will be a very important part to us, as, beyond the communities, the transit operators will be, the other operators who would provide complementary services to something like this.

Mr. Colin Mayes: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Is there anyone else? There remain two minutes.

Ms. Hoeppner.

Ms. Candice Hoeppner (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Thank you.

I have to be honest. I'm very torn on this whole issue, because I come from a rural area where we have VIA services in part of the

riding, but for the most part we use our vehicles. We have to drive into our city to use the airport.

I look at this idea and I recognize that it works very well in Europe. Are we wanting to adopt this plan in Canada because we see that it works in Europe and we think, what a great idea it is, and we should do it here in Canada? Or are we doing this because it truly is good economic policy, because it would help a large number of Canadians?

That's right now where my conflict comes in. I'm wondering whether you can tell me.... The report from 1995 says: "...HSR by itself has no significant implications for productivity and there are no permanent effects on growth potential." I'm just wondering, is this a good plan for Canada as a whole, or are we looking at something that works in Europe and saying, if they have it, we want it too?

Ms. Helena Borges: As I mentioned before, your issues are our issues. We're looking at those. I mentioned that in section 8 we're looking at the policies that exist in other countries and here, and trying to determine if there are comparable rationales for this. We understand, given the population density we have, that we will never have as strong a business case as they do in the European scenario or, for that matter, in Japan, which probably has an even higher density.

We think it's important to look at those elements. The environmental justification for something like this has evolved considerably. The pressures we're facing today were not there 15 years ago. We've never before looked at the economic opportunities that can be realized with something like this, and we want to look at them now.

So this is part of what we're looking at. I guess we're digging in and asking if we are missing something or whether this is just a good idea we'd like to have but is so expensive or unaffordable that the benefits don't justify the costs. We want to look at it. We think it's important to look at all those elements to provide informed information for decision-making, basically.

The Chair: Mr. Volpe.

Hon. Joseph Volpe: Mrs. Borges, when we last talked about an hour ago, I wanted to follow the process of regulatory changes that might be required, especially as they emanate from Transport Canada. I think you made some allusions to those, but I'm going to eschew that opportunity and perhaps have a more detailed discussion down the road.

I'm tempted—and I hope you'll forgive me if I lapse into temptation here—to address a couple of the issues that come forward, in part because I'd like you to finish off my soliloquy with your responses, so forgive me; it's the most efficient way of getting points across.

During the course of various types of governments in this country, Transport Canada has aided in expanding the airport transportation system. There has been a substantial amount of investment in the construction of airports for the purpose of facilitating air transport, whether for goods or for people. We've made enormous investments. In fact, we've devolved the sum of the usual authorities that were vested in Transport Canada to local airport authorities.

Second, I think you said that in terms of railways or highways, we would still have to have that infrastructure in place because of the nature of the country, so that asset has to be maintained, no matter what. I think you said that in the context of answering some observations that related to whether this was a more strategic decision or whether it was a regionally based decision. However, since that study in 1995, an additional two million people have moved into what is generally conceded to be the corridor, i.e., Windsor to Quebec City. That accounts for about 55% of the population of Canada.

Keeping in mind that we have a population that's spread out over a huge expanse—and nobody will ever have me contest that—I'm wondering whether we put out some of these facts in order to discourage a decision or to have a more informed decision, because in terms of population density, along that corridor the population density rivals the population densities in Europe and even in Japan.

I'm concerned that some of the things we are asking our consultants to determine are really outside the parameters of making a decision. When I hear some of my colleagues asking if we are taking passenger capacity away from one particular mode and putting it onto another, it becomes interesting for me, and I am wondering if you can address this.

Most of the studies that show where that passenger capacity comes from.... I thought it was you who said that 44% of the short haul is lost to airlines. I suppose that's the example in Europe, primarily. That may well be true, but that's only in the case where you have high-speed transport that rivals the efficiency of air travel.

For example, if you're looking at Toronto-Ottawa or Toronto-Montreal, you're looking at roughly an hour or an hour and fifteen minutes, and if you have high-speed transport that comes within half an hour of that, then you prompt a decision. In Europe, you eliminate rapid air service. You don't eliminate anything else, and a rapid air service will only be impacted in places like Toronto-Ottawa, Toronto-Montreal, or maybe even Quebec-Montreal. It certainly won't have any effect on all that service that's already been eliminated from Toronto to London to Windsor. That's gone. It just doesn't exist anymore. You know that. Over the course of the time that I've been here, we've been slashing away that service. The airlines have done the very best they could to consolidate service, which means you don't get any.

I'm wondering whether we've done an appropriate assessment on that, because as I said when I started off, what's been holding us back? It hasn't been that we want to copy somebody else. The Spaniards watched our example and then said, "Well, we don't want to do what the Canadians are doing", so they spent close to \$600 billion in industrial strategy based on high-speed rail. They have a population the size of ours, but a country the size of New Brunswick. Why do they want to get from point A to point B any faster than

maybe the roadrunner can get there? And he doesn't need to get there.

● (1655)

I'm wondering whether we're putting up straw men or women in order not to make a decision. How long will it take us to put the money out? I go back to the \$1.8 billion per year. Taking the federal government component of that—and I don't know how much it will be, but let's be generous and say it's 50%—the Department of Transport would be asked to go to cabinet for \$900 million a year for the next 10 years in order to achieve an industrial plan.

Ms. Helena Borges: I can't answer the last part of your question, but I think it's important for us, as officials who have to make recommendations and are making them.... There are three governments—the two provinces are working hand in hand with us on this—and we have stakeholders. As you are aware, Mr. Volpe, when you get into environmental assessments and into making decisions, those who are perceived to be affected negatively will want to understand what the evidence is behind those decisions. It's important for us to have that information.

As you mentioned, the population growth in the corridor has been extensive, but a lot of that growth has been in the two conglomerates: in the Greater Toronto Area and the Golden Horseshoe, and then in the Montreal area. Some of the other communities, even places such as Windsor, where I originate, have lost population, and so it's not even across the corridor. There are pockets of the corridor where that growth has happened.

We need to have that information. I think it's important for us to be able to make the proper assessment and document what the benefits and some of the impacts would be on the other modes. I'll tell you, having been around the Department of Transport for a little while, that even when you make investments in VIA Rail, you get the other modes expressing concern about it, because first, you're paying for capital, and second, you're paying for operating. A high-speed rail system likely will require significant operating subsidies as well, not just capital. Most of the systems around the world are government-subsidized systems, and we expect this one will require subsidies as well.

It is a big investment for both camps, and you want to make sure you have the information and can justify why you would be recommending whatever direction ultimately is recommended.

● (1700)

The Chair: Mr. Cannan.

Mr. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. As a visitor to the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to ask a couple of questions.

It's good to see you again, Ms. Borges.

I've had a chance as well to travel to Japan, and the Shinkansen, the bullet train, is phenomenal technology. Obviously the density of population that Mr. Volpe alluded to—the corridor, the demographic, and the geographic area—is what we're studying. I grew up in Alberta, and the Edmonton-Calgary corridor has been studied, but nobody has come up with a viable economic or business case to date, even with that kind of concentrated population.

So I have a couple of questions. One is that we're looking at the ridership of rail versus all the other modes of transportation and at the expediency demanded by society: we need to get from point A to point B quickly. Is rail ridership on the increase?

Ms. Helena Borges: Ridership has increased in the past year for VIA. I forget the exact amount, but it's by close to 1%. As you may recall, VIA's network was significantly reduced back in 1990, and since then, every year VIA has recorded small but definite improvements.

We have seen important growth in some of the commuter rail systems across the country, whether on West Coast Express in British Columbia, GO in Toronto, or AMT in Montreal. I think what that's telling us is that people are prepared to shift to those modes and are travelling longer distances on those modes. Most of the commuter rail services are travelling quite a distance. They're not short-haul; they're a significant distance apart. And people seem more amenable to taking it.

I guess we want to see whether that trend can be applied to this, and whether this service is provided in a timely trip time that starts to rival air or can provide a time duration equivalent to air. I think, as many people notice, that it's much more convenient to travel by rail. As you know, we don't have to sit stuffed together in an airplane and don't have to do the same kind of check-in as early as possible. People may be more amenable to taking rail than they were 10 or 15 years ago.

Mr. Ron Cannan: Obviously that's why niche airlines such as WestJet—or Porter, specifically to Toronto—even this week sat on the tarmac for a while in Toronto. You could probably be back and forth from downtown Ottawa to Toronto within that waiting time, sometimes.

The supplementary question, then, as we look at this study—and some of the previous speakers alluded to it—is that I want to know whether, in the business model out of this study, they will be looking at other options, such as a P3 model.

Ms. Helena Borges: They will, definitely. We've asked them, in fact, to look at that.

We think this is an opportunity in two ways: one, to attract other investment in a service like this, but also as a model whereby we could share some of the risk with the private sector, and some of the opportunity too. So a P3 model is something we definitely want to look at.

They looked at it in the 1992-1995 study. Back then, P3s were not really well known, but now they're used highly across the country and they're practised across the world. We think there might be opportunities here.

●(1705)

Mr. Ron Cannan: I have one last question with regard to a cost-benefit analysis. I know that from an environmental perspective it's one of the elements. If you take the multi-billions of dollars that are being invested in this and look at investing in other modes of transportation and at green technology, it's growing at an accelerating speed—where we are today and with what's out there; for example, a lithium battery for the automobile and working towards other modes of transportation. Is this going to be part of the study as well: looking at the economics of this project versus investing in other green-friendly technology?

Ms. Helena Borges: We're looking at it in terms of the impact on the environment of using high-speed versus.... For example, as we all know, the automobile has become very efficient. The emissions it now emits, compared with those from automobiles 15 years ago, are very different.

This has been a challenge every time we look at passenger rail. Passenger rail is very environmentally friendly when you have large numbers of people, because rail is more environmentally friendly than the other modes, but you need the people on it. When we're looking at this, we need to keep in mind what kind of energy would be used for this service. If it's electricity, does it exist? Do we have it? What's the impact of the emissions from that versus continuing to use the automobile, versus continuing to use more planes, or even buses? That is part of the benefit-cost analysis of the impact on the environment.

As well, there is the physical environment, because depending on the routing, we again could be impacting the physical environment through the location of the service.

Mr. Ron Cannan: We may need a solar-powered train. Thank you.

The Chair: That concludes the rounds, but I think we're going to open up the floor and allow some individual questions. I have Mr. Dhaliwal, and then we'll just keep making up the list.

Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Borges, I was going through the cost-benefit analysis you have done, and I see that you have assumed a discount rate of 8%. With a 1% change, there is quite a bit of change. You can achieve a lot if you go to 7%, or if you go to 10%.

So what is the discount rate you foresee in today's market, and how would it impact the cost-benefit analysis that we have?

Ms. Helena Borges: That was for the previous study. We're going to be redoing all of it.

At this point we haven't discussed yet with consultants what discount rates to use. It's usually an average of what the provinces use and what the federal government uses. Treasury Board has a discount rate that it uses, but each of the provinces tends to use something different. We'll probably look at what market discount rate would be suggested in terms of a project of probably a 30-year lifespan or so and then try to normalize that with what the treasury boards of the three governments would impose.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Do you see it as higher or lower than 8% now?

Ms. Helena Borges: I wouldn't want to speculate at this point. We'll wait to see.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Okay, thank you.

The Chair: Monsieur Laframboise.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Ms. Borges, the request for proposal, for which the Government of Canada paid \$1 million of the \$3 million, is dated August 14, 2008. Since then, though, the Americans have launched an initiative. Do you think it would be a good idea to ask that the consultant take the American policy into account?

I do not know the results of our study. I do not know whether the study will recommend development at the stations in Montreal and so on. Perhaps one day there will be a link with the Americans. It might be a good idea to anticipate that. The consultant may say it is too early to do so. Don't you think that might be worthwhile, even if it means sending a request to Quebec and Ontario as well, indicating that the committee is concerned about what is happening in the United States and would like that to be taken into account?

Ms. Helena Borges: We have already included that in section 8, which refers to a review of transportation policies in other countries with HSR. The Americans are the closest example for us. We want to look at that, and I think that the study will be completed by January or perhaps February.

As for the American program, according to the schedule, the invitation to the first round of proposals is not extended to later this year. It concerns projects that are ready to go. The second round, which involves high speed rail corridors, may not take place before next year. We do not know the date. It is not included in the report. However, I think we will have time to look at that and see whether it has an impact on the results of our study. Our study will be at a higher level. The idea is to make recommendations and see what we should do. Should we go ahead or not? I think we will be able to take all those considerations into account when we decide what should be done and what the next step might be.

• (1710)

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Section 8 refers to other countries with HSR. The Americans do not yet have high speed rail.

Ms. Helena Borges: Not yet, but it's—

Mr. Mario Laframboise: It's completely—

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Bevington.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: I think there have been some interesting points raised. I follow Mr. Cannan's point very well, that this is in competition with other forms.

When you look at a new highway study—and I've been involved in these—there's an assessment of the cost to the user of the highway or the potential saving to the user of the highway. Is this part of what you're doing? Does the time saved by people enter into the equation?

Ms. Helena Borges: The environmental and social impacts constitute one of the savings to be gained by doing a thorough social and environmental cost-benefit analysis.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: And that wasn't done last time?

Ms. Helena Borges: It was done, but that was 15 years ago. Things that are preoccupations today were different then. We want to do a more in-depth analysis. Our own department, Transport Canada, did a study over the past couple of years, together with the provincial governments and the modes, the different private companies. It's a full-cost accounting of the true impact of the various modes of transportation on the environment, on society, and on the economy. In a way, it's quite revolutionary, because no country has ever done it. It's very difficult to do. You'll notice that in the terms of reference we mention that initiative. We are taking some of the principles and the measurements done in that initiative and using them in the assessments that we're doing here.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Brown.

Ms. Lois Brown: I have an observation: this report was done in 1995 and never implemented. I find that very interesting.

In a paper that recently came to my office from the Canadian Urban Transit Association, they talk about transit vehicles, customer amenities, software, and systems. What new technologies available to us today might improve this study? I'm thinking of signals or new designs in railcars that have become available. Is there new steel production that would benefit the rail process now? Could you talk a bit about that?

Ms. Helena Borges: I think the assessment of the technologies is going to get to that. There are so many systems today that weren't available 10 or 15 years ago. High-speed rail isn't that old, actually. It's about 40 years old, and when we started, there was probably only one kind of system. Now in Europe every country uses a different kind of high-speed system. In fact, in some countries they might even be using more than one kind.

• (1715)

Mr. Kevin Lawless: The interesting thing is that all the manufacturers now have whole families of technologies available, whereas before they offered only one choice. There were always debates over which company to choose. Now that's not a problem. Also, they are able to manufacture these machines on a much more customized basis.

Ms. Lois Brown: So you're saying that steel alloys would be available to work in conjunction with a certain type of car body?

Ms. Helena Borges: Exactly. Even the track technologies and the signal systems have evolved significantly, and they are continuing to evolve. In fact, the previous U.S. government made a decision to require positive train control on the current freight systems that are also accommodating passenger systems. This is going to be quite revolutionary. We don't have those in North America right now. They're used in Europe. Doing this will allow for optimization of the shared infrastructure and elimination of many safety concerns. If you go ahead with this, you want to make sure you're getting the best technology, whether it's track, car, or locomotive.

Ms. Lois Brown: But does that provide opportunity for jobs in Canada? We have many of those technologies.

Ms. Helena Borges: We would hope so, yes. Bombardier is a world leader. This could be an opportunity for them. We also have Alstom in this country. We have Siemens here as well. There are opportunities to come from something like this.

The Chair: Mr. Kennedy.

Mr. Gerard Kennedy: I understand that more precise answers are being deferred to studies, which has been the fate of this project for some time, yet it would seem that most of the factors under consideration, most of the elements that are subject to change, are positive factors in favour of what's happening here. Previously there were many successful scenarios, certainly for portions of the project. The opportunity cost reflected in the discount rate has changed since then. What do you see that could be critically different on the negative side? There are so many things to consider, like the cost to other forms of transportation. For example, I assume that the airlines are economically fragile right now. A decision on this will have an impact. Are there other things that Transport would anticipate?

I would also like to know a little more about your ministry and your role in it. Have you been around for some time? For example, I would assume that this involves a strategic set of questions that the ministry would ordinarily be on top of. I understand you're going to be a part of the study, if it's done like the last one, and it seems to be in the request for proposal stage. Does the ministry have other documents, other policy options, that they've been providing? Is there a question of capacity within the ministry? I want your best advice about what's likely to be looked at, the pluses and maybe some of the minuses. How much has been dedicated to this study? How will it serve to advise the minister and the rest of us?

Ms. Helena Borges: As to the negatives, one could be the reaction of some of the other modes to the impacts on them and their viability. What will this mean in the future for them? As with any other infrastructure project, we often underestimate the reaction of the people who are affected by it.

While most people would say it was fantastic, some people might still oppose trains operating in their backyards or going through their corridors. We can't underestimate these community impacts. That's part of the environmental assessment process that has to take place. We have to be cognizant of that. Many people today are well serviced by VIA Rail, and others would like to be. But the routing is going to go somewhere, which means that some people may not get the service. These people may also react negatively.

• (1720)

Mr. Gerard Kennedy: I was hoping for any fundamentals on the viability of the project. I understand that for many of the details we must defer to the updated information, but I'm hoping and wondering whether on the broad strokes there is anything there. Perhaps you could make a quick response on the capacity issue.

Ms. Helena Borges: There isn't anything that stands out at us right now as impossible.

On the capacity issue, I have a team, and Mr. Lawless is one of the members. There are others who are spending a huge chunk of their time on this, working with the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, who also have dedicated staff on the file and who are coaching or guiding the consultants as they do their work. We also have access to other resources within the department who have expertise in various areas, such as the other modes, or our economic analysis unit, which has done the full cost, or our environmental affairs unit.

I'm participating as well. I'm a member of the steering committee, as is my assistant deputy minister, and we have technical members on the committee participating in all steps of the way. So I think we have the capacity internally to take this on.

Mr. Gerard Kennedy: Are you new to this project, or is this a standing capacity of the department?

Ms. Helena Borges: I've been doing rail files now since 2001.

The Chair: Mr. Laframboise.

[Translation]

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Earlier, you said that VIA Rail is developing higher speed rail and improving the tracks in some places. So VIA Rail is gradually heading toward higher speed rail.

Ms. Helena Borges: That is true right now in some parts of the corridor, yes. I do not know what the future holds, because the funding VIA Rail received this year is certainly spread over two or three years. It will allow improvements, but not in all the corridors. Right now, we do not know what will happen.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Has your department already made plans? Have you made plans or does VIA Rail submit its plans to you?

Ms. Helena Borges: VIA Rail does it.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: So you do no planning. You wait for VIA Rail to submit requests?

Ms. Helena Borges: No, we work together. It is not VIA Rail but the department that has responsibility for this project. What we do with the carrier is discuss how we can improve the VIA Rail system and provide faster, safer service. That is how we work together. Our goal is to improve the system currently in place.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: You proceed according to the money that is available or you make requests.

Ms. Helena Borges: Yes, the department and VIA Rail make requests to the government.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: You must have another project in the works. Is that the case?

Ms. Helena Borges: We are starting to implement the plan that VIA Rail and the department approved in 2007, using the additional funding the government provided this year. That will take three or four years.

Mr. Mario Laframboise: Okay.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

The last question goes to Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Going back to the Pacific northwest corridor that Mr. Obama is supporting, the way I see it is this. I have travelled extensively in Asia and also in eastern Europe. Where we see high-speed trains, I have seen that tourism has evolved and that there is a great deal of business in small communities. In the case of Vancouver, we haven't even followed up on Obama's commitment for our short sector between Vancouver and the border, something that would have a very positive impact on tourism.

How do you see this corridor? Do you see any positive impact on tourism if we go through this process?

Ms. Helena Borges: I think overall that passenger rail is a big contributor to tourism in Canada. I can speak for VIA today. VIA provides service across the country. A significant portion of its ridership are tourists who come in, whether on the west coast or the east coast, and go across Canada; to the east coast, for example, to visit Nova Scotia, or even places such as P.E.I. Even though VIA doesn't go there, there are still people who travel on the train to other places and then hop on a bus or go by some other means.

I think passenger rail is appealing to tourists; it's a way to see the country. VIA has products to attract the tourists, and many tourists from Europe and Asian countries are used to travelling by rail. So this is a real, feasible option for them, and in some cases probably less costly than having to travel by air. And they get to see more, because they're on the ground, not in the air. You actually visibly see what you're going through.

So rail tends to have a positive impact on tourism.

• (1725)

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Jean, you had a request.

Mr. Brian Jean: I didn't have an opportunity to question, and I don't need one, but I was wondering whether the department had any information. They mentioned that the previous study called for \$18 billion over 10 years, but also that there was new technology available. I was wondering what the increased cost—obviously, if there is an increased cost—per kilometre or per track would be in

relation to it. I am interested in that new technology and, if there is an increase in cost, in what it would be.

I was also wondering what the technology itself is. You mentioned three different modes. We need this in writing, if you would.

Finally, if you have additional information on costs for rail in downtown congested areas, I'm interested, because I always have a four-hour wait in Toronto, but I don't have any wait on Highway 401, for instance. Obviously the high-speed rail is important, but I'm curious about the cost in major urban centres.

Just give us approximations, so that we can have an understanding of where we're coming from, what the new technology is, and what the cost would be. It has to go through the clerk, but if you want more clarification, I'd be happy to provide that to you in writing as well.

Ms. Helena Borges: As I mentioned, part of the study is looking at the possible technology options. We don't have available right now what the consultants are going to come up with, because as part of the requirement we've asked them to keep in mind the Canadian environment, the Canadian ridership, and the routing distance. They're going to be making those recommendations to us. Attached to them will be the representative cost of those technologies, probably in today's market prices, as well as what track infrastructure and structures would go with providing the service.

Mr. Brian Jean: That's exactly what I'm interested in.

Is there data available today from companies such as Bombardier on approximate costs?

Ms. Helena Borges: They would be able to provide you with data, but it's not something you can take to the store to say, "I want to buy X". Everything is customized. They can probably give an indication of the average price of a railcar or of a system that they sell in Europe. They'll probably be able to—

Mr. Brian Jean: If the department does have specific information in relation to this, just on a general basis, I would appreciate having it.

Ms. Helena Borges: Okay. We'll see what we can provide.

The Chair: With that, I'll thank our guests.

Just for the advice of the committee, on Thursday, May 14, we will have the High Speed Rail Canada people visiting us, and the Railway Association of Canada. Then, after the break, on May 26 at the first meeting back, we have Bombardier and the Canadian Airports Council.

That's it. I just want to let everybody know that I sent an invitation to all members of the committee for a luncheon tomorrow with the new president of the Vancouver Port Authority.

Mr. Dennis Bevington: Is it tomorrow or Thursday?

The Chair: It's Thursday. I'm sorry; I apologize.

If you are planning to come, I would be glad if you gave my office a heads up, so that we'll know the number of people to expect.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.

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