



The Upper Ottawa Valley in the year 2020, and how we got there

The following narrative is speculative, but it shows what I think is a realistic picture of what the economy of the Upper Ottawa Valley might look like a few years from now if the currently intact rail line up the Valley is retained as an operating railway. None of what is suggested is based on any commitment as yet by any of the parties mentioned. Without the railway the area's economy will be weaker and development of employment and the area's resources will be more uncertain and at higher risk of failure.

Imagine that it is now the year 2020.

The Ottawa Valley still retains its rural attractions, but also has a vibrant, diversified modern economy based on its stable, highly skilled workforce and local resources. The short line railway running the length of the Ottawa Valley, linking to national railways in North Bay to the west and in Ottawa in the east, is now seven years old. It continues to serve multiple local customers' needs and rail traffic passing through the Valley, at a profit.

In Pembroke both the long-established and innovative new industries receive raw materials and ship their products east and west by rail. In Petawawa, after the realignment of one section of the rail line, several successful commercial developments have been built in the heart of the growing city. The local saw mills regularly receive logs and ship their raw lumber, telephone poles and fabricated products by rail. The Canadian Forces Base routinely receives by rail much of its bulk supplies and equipment, as well as hazardous goods such as aviation fuel and munitions. Occasional movements of large numbers of military vehicles and containers of equipment are securely and efficiently loaded onto rail on the base's own spur line. These shipments continue to increase as the base takes on more training for other countries on both an exchange and commercial basis.

In the Municipality of Deep River, AECL was rejuvenated and reenergized by the restructuring of 2014, and the laboratories now have a broader mandate. The organization continues to enhance and leverage its nuclear technology for both the benefit of all Canadians and commercial gain. The labs design, assemble, test, and ship nuclear batteries that provide affordable and autonomous municipal electricity and heating in isolated communities all over northern Canada. Decommissioning of shutdown facilities at the laboratories is proceeding rapidly, and is making extensive use of the nearby rail facilities in Laurentian Hills in dealing with the resulting wastes. The Chalk River business park is buzzing as a result of the new commercial activities at the laboratories. More sidings, and additional material storage and loading facilities are under construction in the rail yard.

In the Municipality of Head, Clara, and Maria, the graphite mine that opened in 2013 is expected to continue shipping over 18,000 tons per year of high-quality graphite to factories producing lithium ion batteries for electric vehicles for many decades to come. Several now well-established wood pellet plants are shipping their product as fast as they can produce it to Montreal for loading onto ships bound for Europe. Loggers now ship most of their logs by rail to the sawmills down the Valley.

Large CN and CP freight trains use the rail line periodically. This relieves the ever-increasing pressure on the overburdened main lines through Toronto. The Ottawa Valley also serves as a shorter, secure, all-Canadian route that avoids the unpredictable protectionist restrictions and longer alternative routes in the US as that country still struggles to fully recover from the Great Recession of 2008-15.

Highway 17 is still the only road through the Upper Ottawa Valley. Although it is the Trans-Canada Highway, it is still only a two-lane highway and is expected to remain so for the foreseeable future. China and India are consuming an ever greater fraction of the world's production of petroleum-based fuels and gasoline now costs \$5 a litre. Travel by personal fossil-fuelled vehicle is becoming more and more costly, and most of the personal vehicles that do remain are all-electric. Public transportation systems are urgently being expanded across North America in both urban and rural areas. The Valley's short-haul bus and shuttle companies are doing a roaring business, as are the bicycle retailers and repair shops.

Diesel fuel also costs \$5 a litre, and technology is not available to electrify long-distance transport trucks. Most long-haul bulk shipments are carried by rail as the fuel costs of truck transport continue their inexorable rise. Industry is adjusting to living with less "just-in-time" service, and is rediscovering the virtues of maintaining buffer stocks of raw materials - they increase resilience in coping with supply chain upsets. Truckers are busier than ever. Rather than undertaking constant cross-country long haul trips as in the past, they carry out efficient and cost-effective short hauls from railheads and other distribution centres to final destination points. They can regularly sleep in their own beds rather than far from home.

Traffic accident rates on highway 17 continue to drop with the decreasing traffic of long-haul transport trucks and personal vehicles. In winter motorists encounter fewer dangerous blinding clouds of snow when they pass the remaining transport trucks. Roadside residents are delighted at the decrease in traffic noise. The value of the all-weather rail line was unforgettably shown during the great ice storm and blizzard of 2016 when the highway was closed and aircraft were grounded for over a week. The railway was the only means for evacuating patients and carrying emergency supplies to communities throughout the Upper Valley and many lives were saved.

Pembroke has a well-used daily commuter service to Ottawa. Travellers appreciate being able to work or relax in comfort throughout the trip to the connection with the Ottawa Light Rail Transit system. The connection will become even better when Ottawa finishes laying track to reopen the train station opposite Parliament in the city core. Weekly passenger trains through the Valley link Sault St Marie to Ottawa in about 12 hours. Occasional tourist trains and rail fan tours let visitors see the beauty of the Valley at their leisure, and back-country enthusiasts can board and detrain along the route.

How did all this come about, given the dark prospects in early 2012?

At the outset, petitions asking civic leaders to take action to save the rail lines were circulated at both ends of the Valley. The petition to save the Pembroke-Mattawa section of railway attracted over 1000 signatures alone. Letter-writing campaigns to the Federal and Provincial governments were undertaken.

A concerted effort by all stakeholders including business and industry, media and politicians saw the merit of keeping the rails on the ground and subsequent continued rail operation. It demonstrated a direct relationship not only to sustaining the local economy, but also to the real possibility of economic rejuvenation in the region.

The working details of rail line retention were worked out in agreement with all levels of government including the municipalities along the line, business, and industry. Process questions and issues including liabilities, co-operations and financing were addressed and agreed upon.

Employment increased by hundreds of part-time and full-time jobs as industry ramped up. New hires surfaced thanks to re-opened plants and factories and from within the railway operation itself. Newly established "reload" centres in such areas as Pembroke and Portage-du-Fort provided efficient access to shippers using rail and a combination of rail and truck.

The rebirth and building success of increased shipments by rail also contributed to a proportionately increasing reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. In the early 21st century, rail is proving it gives a sustainable and increasing contribution to environmental responsibility.

Most important of all to making this future a reality was to stop viewing the rail line as a relic of 19th and 20th century technology - that was at best irrelevant and at worst a hindrance to the economic life and development of the Valley. Instead, it was recognized for what it really is: a modern, sustainable, powerful, multipurpose enabling technology that is already in place. The rail line can both be the spine of the Upper Ottawa Valley economy over the long term, and provide the last alternative short-distance cross-Canada rail connection bypassing the Greater Toronto Area. It would have been next to impossible to replace it if we had let it go.

Michael Stephens

February 15, 2012

