

Local Railway Items from Area Papers - 2003

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Otrain

Ottawa close to funding deal on north-south railway line.

By Ken Gray.

Federal and city officials have been meeting for the last month trying to hammer out funding for a \$700-million north-south light-rail system for Ottawa.

"We expect a positive response," said Mayor Bob Chiarelli yesterday of the negotiation between city staff and members of Industry Minister Allan Rock's department. There is a "strong willingness" by the federal government to contribute to transit in Ottawa, the mayor said.

He expects federal money to be ready "almost immediately," though he declined to estimate an amount. "I don't want to negotiate publicly," Mr. Chiarelli said.

The north-south system, slated to be built between 2006 and 2008, would extend from Limebank and Armstrong roads southwest of Ottawa airport, running south of the airport and joining the current O-Train route to Bayview. It would then loop into downtown along either Sparks or Queen streets, said Ned Lathrop, the city's manager of development services. There are negotiations about an airport stop, Mr. Lathrop said.

The current heavy diesel O-Train would be discontinued and likely will be replaced by light electric rail, Mr. Chiarelli said.

"Ninety per cent of road bed modification used for the O-Train could be adapted to the new system, Mr. Lathrop said.

Concurrently with the city-federal talks, the municipalities of Gatineau and Ottawa and the National Capital Commission have been holding separate meetings to discuss a cross-border light-rail link and rapid-bus routes between the two cities.

Those talks have included discussions about the type of rail vehicles to be used and the possibility of an extension of light rail from Bayview across the Prince of Wales Bridge and into downtown Gatineau.

The north-south route is the first phase of a \$3-billion 20-year rapid-transit plan that would link most areas of the city to light-rail or rapid-bus service.

Mr. Chiarelli could not say how much money will come out of the discussions, but the city already spends about \$100 million a year on transit infrastructure and needs about \$150 million annually to proceed with rapid-transit expansion. The city also hopes to tap into provincial infrastructure money and public-private partnerships, the mayor said.

"We've been spending hundreds of millions of dollars already," he said, citing the new Bayshore transitway station, an expanded Billings-Bridge station, new park-and-rides and bus lanes on Woodroffe Avenue.

The city has invested about \$1 billion in the Transitway and transit over the last 22 years, Mr. Chiarelli said.

Spending in the first few years of light-rail might be low as environmental assessments, design work and shopping for vehicles must occur, Mr. Chiarelli said. In those years, higher funding could go to bus-related transit, the mayor said, but as time goes on money would shift to light rail once vehicle purchases and roadbed building occurs.

"We're still looking for the funding recipe," the mayor said. In addition to the stimulus created by construction of the line, Mr. Lathrop said there will be intensification of development at stations along the line that should be good for the area economy.

The Bayview station would see the light-rail line and the transitway intersect and that would create revitalization in that under-developed area, Mr. Lathrop said.

The proposed Ottawa central library has been touted for the Bayview-LeBreton Flats and the new war museum is already under construction there.

"I think you will see LeBreton Flats benefitting from it and Sparks Street benefiting from it if that route is chosen," Mr. Lathrop said.

The light-rail line through downtown would help tourists visit the Parliament Buildings and other national attractions, Mr. Lathrop said.

"Tourism is a critical issue," he said.

On Thursday, David Jeanes, the president of Transport 2000, expressed concern that reconstruction of the O-Train line could cause a two-year disruption in service to Carleton University.

Mr. Lathrop acknowledged there would be a disruption but doubted it would be two years.

"I hope not," he said.