



# **The Case for Getting VIA Train 651 Back on Track**

Report on the critical importance of commuter  
train services for a growing Eastern Ontario

Report produced by a consortium of concerned municipalities | September 2022

# Purpose

The purpose of this report is to demonstrate the necessary return to service of VIA Rail Canada's Train 651 along the Kingston-to-Toronto corridor in Eastern Ontario, based on ridership demand, economic viability, and environmental sustainability.

# Background

Commuters in Eastern Ontario living along the Kingston-to-Toronto VIA Rail corridor have lost their access to reliable, affordable, and timely commuter train transportation.

Prior to the pandemic, VIA's Train 651 successfully serviced commuter ridership needs along this corridor, connecting Eastern Ontario to the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Residents commuted to work, school and training, and to much-needed medical treatments.

Following a drop in ridership due to the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, VIA announced the suspension of Train 651. At the end of June 2022, most of the organization's previous train routes resumed service across the country, but Train 651 was not one of the services reinstated. With the reopening of the province, strong provincial economic and job growth, and a growing demand by both past and present train users, it is time for the resumption of VIA's Train 651.

**VIA Train 651 is a lifeline for economic renewal in Eastern Ontario providing mobility options, supporting workers, spurring economic growth and supporting public environmental policies for energy use, air quality and carbon emissions.**

The mayors and wardens of Eastern Ontario counties and cities situated along the Kingston-to-Toronto corridor have commissioned this report to demonstrate the critical need for the return to service of Train 651 and are calling upon VIA to act.

*The Case for Getting VIA Train 651 Back on Track*, details the critical need for VIA's commuter train service. The report demonstrates the critical importance for Eastern Ontario commuters to have access to affordable and convenient transportation options rather than making the choice between unemployment or a costly and time-consuming commute.

The report summarizes the results of an online survey of 2,811 commuters between July 7 and August 5, 2022. It shows that workers from Eastern Ontario communities along the Kingston-to-Toronto corridor will be hard hit, with increased barriers of access to job opportunities, education and retraining, and medical appointments.

# Eastern Ontario's Labour Force is Stronger Than Ever

The Province is rebuilding the economy and is investing in job growth and manufacturing sector expansion, ensuring all communities across the province have the opportunity to benefit from good jobs and necessary skills training.

**Eastern Ontario's labour force is strong, growing at a faster rate than anywhere else in the province, and is ready to help power Ontario's economic renewal.**

More than ever, workers rely on an efficient transportation system to maximize their employment opportunities by connecting them to employers in desperate need of workers and to access training facilities to enhance their skills:

- **The labour force in Eastern Ontario is stronger than pre-pandemic levels, having grown 6.6%. This is faster than the provincial rate of 4.7%**

(Labour Force Survey, July 2022)

- **Eastern Ontario's population is growing at a faster rate than the rest of the province, 6.4% compared to 5.8%**

(2021 Census)

- **Recruiting skilled employees remains the greatest obstacle for employers in Ontario, aside from inflationary concerns**

(Canadian Survey on Business Conditions, Q2 2022)

Ontario wants to put workers to work, but skilled workers in Eastern Ontario face barriers in connecting with job vacancies. For these workers, they may face the unfortunate prospect of unemployment or underemployment. Conversely, employers will continue to face growing shortages of qualified workers.

In addition, young adults acquiring in-demand skills and mature adults considering skills upgrading need a reliable, efficient, and timely transportation option to attend education and training opportunities.

# Ridership Demand by Eastern Ontario Commuters

In response to community concerns, the counties of Northumberland and Hastings, and the cities of Kingston, Belleville and Quinte West, partnered to conduct a survey, “Keeping Your Commute on Track: Survey on Commuter Train Services”.



Between July 7 and August 5, 2022, survey data was obtained from 2,811 residents on their past use and anticipated future need of commuter train services.

Residents also responded with information about the impact the loss of these services has when it comes to increased transportation costs, missed job opportunities and impact to the environment.

**Findings indicate that ridership will not only return to levels seen immediately prior to the cancellation of services, but **will significantly increase** due to population migration, increased worker demand and economic growth in Eastern Ontario since the cancellation of services.**

## Pre-Covid VIA Train 651 usage and patterns



52% of respondents used Train 651



66% of users accessed this service for work



14% of users accessed the service for education and medical purposes



76% of users accessed the service one or more times per week



22% used the service daily



**96%**  
of pre-covid  
regular users  
will return upon  
resumption of  
service

## When Train 651 service resumes



**85% of all respondents will use the service with;**



**70% using the service one or more times per week**



**31% being new users of the service**

## Riders Value VIA Rail Canada Service

Riders value the VIA Train 651 service for the convenience and affordability, to access employment and education opportunities, to reduce the high cost of living, and to make a positive impact on the environment.

**Future regular users value** the service when it comes to convenience, affordability and the environment when compared to other choices of transportation:



**82% of respondents want to avoid traffic and vehicle use**



**64% want the service as an alternative to vehicle travel due to high fuel costs**

The Consumer Price Index for Ontario reflects a 32.4% increase in the price of gasoline as of July 2022, as compared with the previous year.



**63% want to take action with climate change and reduce their environmental footprint**

## If Train 651 service is not restored



**65% of respondents will be impacted in their ability to get to work**



**63% will be impacted in their ability to get to medical appointments**



**Since Train 651 was suspended,** cars have been the most often used alternate means of travel, which further contributes to straining infrastructure, global warming due to air emissions and further congestion on Ontario's busy roads.

This demanding and time-consuming commute is reducing worker mobility and is detrimental to the quality of life of our residents, who are seeking a greener, more efficient alternative.

## Conclusion

**Ontario has reopened, demand has returned and so should VIA Train 651.**

Not only will nearly all existing Train 651 riders surveyed return, but there is a demonstrated demand amongst potential new users eager to access this critical service. Eastern Ontario deserves the support needed to protect hard-working Ontarians, protect the environment, and grow Ontario's economy.

**Reinstatement of VIA Rail Canada's Train 651 is imperative to the economic prosperity and wellbeing of residents of the province and in particular residents of Eastern Ontario along the Kingston-to-Toronto corridor.**

Fast, reliable, and sustainable transportation options are needed to get a thriving labour force to work, students and adults to school to acquire in-demand skills and retraining, and access to much needed medical treatment.

## Recommendation

As directed by Transport Canada, Canadians deserve fast, frequent and reliable train service that provides a cleaner transportation alternative.

Aligned with this, VIA Rail Canada declares:

**“VIA Rail Canada’s mandate is to operate the national passenger rail services on behalf of the Government of Canada, offering intercity rail services and ensuring transportation services to regional and remote communities.”**

Further, VIA’s goal states:

**“We want to offer our passengers a safe, more reliable and enjoyable experience while helping to protect the environment and boost the Canadian economy.”**

The partnership of communities behind this report could not agree more with the importance of this goal. More than ever, workers rely on an efficient transportation system to maximize their employment opportunities by connecting them to employers in desperate need of workers and to access training facilities to enhance their skills.

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Based on the evidence presented in this report and the growing concern from residents in this region, it is time for VIA to welcome back rides on Train 651. The communities of Northumberland, Hastings, Quinte West, Belleville and Kingston call on VIA Rail Canada to meet the commuter service needs of hard-working Eastern Ontarians— helping to build back our economy and protect the environment— by getting Train 651 **back on track**.



For information about  
*'Keeping Your Commuter on Track: Survey on Commuter Train Services'*  
please email [communications@northumberland.ca](mailto:communications@northumberland.ca)

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