



# **The *Canadian* on the CN Prairie North Line: A Strategic Solution**

**Prairie North Rail Passenger Train Inc.  
North Battleford, SK**

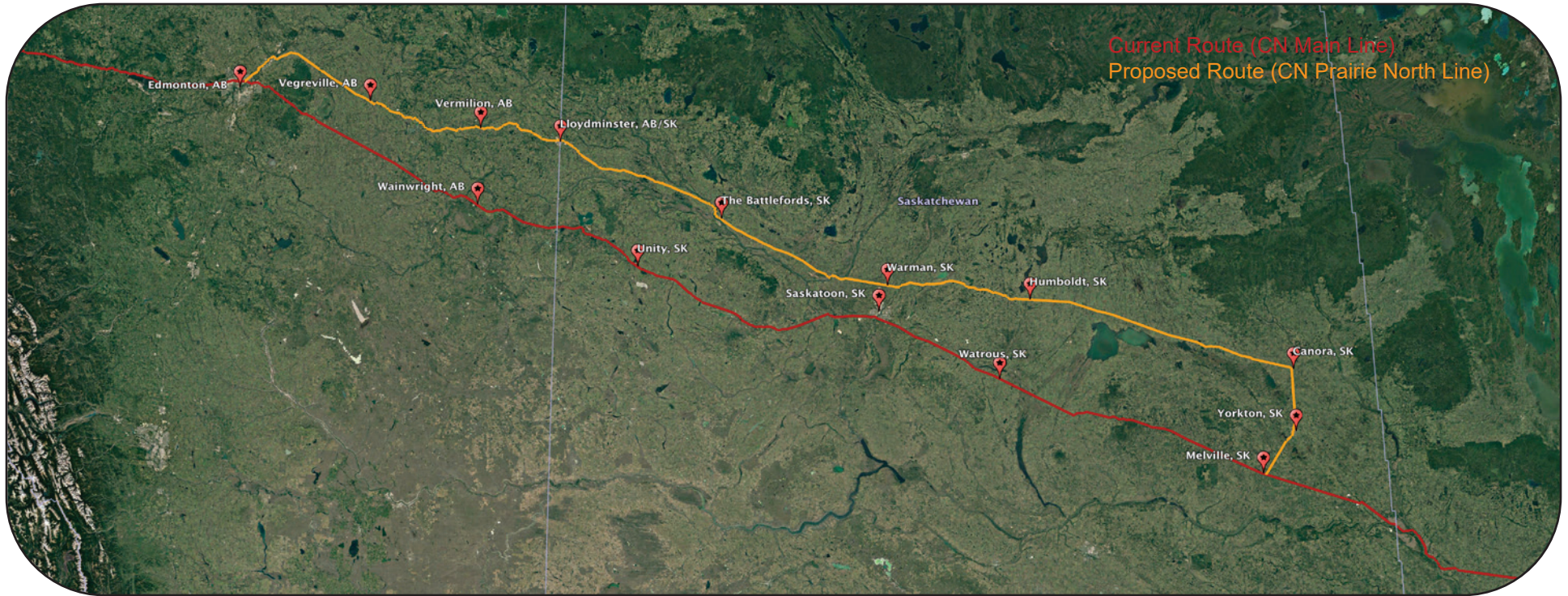
Version: 2.07.11

# Contents

Overview	3
History	4
An Unsustainable Situation	5
A Strategic Solution	8
Connecting More Communities	9
Telling the Stories of the Region	12
A Better View	14
A Win for all Stakeholders	15



Source: Shutterstock



## Overview

This proposal has been prepared for the consideration of the Government of Canada to alter the current route of VIA Rail's the *Canadian* from its current route on the CN Main Line to the CN Prairie North Line through Saskatchewan and Alberta.

The proposed route would

- compete with less CN freight traffic, helping VIA Rail to achieve better on-time performance and improve rail safety
- travel through larger population centres to reach more potential VIA Rail customers
- connect more Indigenous and rural communities
- travel closer to more National Historic Sites and National Parks
- offer more scenic topography

## Quick Route Comparison

	Prairie North Line	Main Line
Population in Urban Centres*	128,231	22,663
Weight Limit in pounds	286,000	286,000
Speed Limit	50 mph	50 mph
Approx Distance	925 km	825 km

*\*not including Greater Saskatoon and Edmonton populations, which are shared by both routes*

# History

The *Canadian* is a transcontinental passenger train operated by VIA Rail Canada with service between Toronto, ON and Vancouver, BC using CN trackage.

The train was introduced on April 24, 1955 by the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) and provided transcontinental service between Montreal, QC and Vancouver, BC through Regina, SK and Calgary, AB on the prairies.

On the same day, Canadian National Railways (CN) introduced its new transcontinental service, the *Super Continental*, with service from Toronto, ON to Vancouver, BC using the CN Main Line through Winnipeg, MB, Saskatoon, SK, and Edmonton, AB on the prairies.

The *Super Continental* route also incorporated the CN Prairie North Line from Saskatoon, SK to Edmonton, AB through North Battleford, SK and Lloydminster, AB/SK instead of the CN Main Line route through Unity, SK and Wainwright, AB.

In 1978, VIA Rail, a federal crown corporation, assumed responsibility for CPR's passenger services including the *Canadian*. In 1981, CN discontinued the *Super Continental* and since that time the *Canadian* has been the only transcontinental passenger train.

In 1990, VIA Rail moved from CPR trackage to the more northerly CN route, bypassing Regina, SK and Calgary, AB in favour of Saskatoon, SK, and Edmonton, AB. The new route used the CN Main Line exclusively and did not incorporate the CN Prairie North Line like the *Super Continental*.



A comparison of the historic routes of the Canadian

1558	Ar WINNIPEG . . . . . Man.	Lv	"	10:58 am	"	11:25 pm	"
	Lv WINNIPEG	"	Ar	"	"	8:40 pm	"
1412	Portage la Prairie . . . . . "	"	"	10:10 am	"	7:50 pm	"
1486	Brandon North . . . . . "	"	"	8:57 am	"	6:20 pm	"
1501	Ar Rivers . . . . . Man.	Lv	"	7:31 am	"	4:37 pm	"
	Lv Rivers	"	Ar	"	"	4:15 pm	"
1638	Ar Melville . . . . . Sask.	Lv	"	7:00 am	"	4:05 pm	"
	Lv Melville	"	Ar	"	"	4:25 am	"
1767	Ar Watrous . . . . . "	Lv	"	4:10 am	"	12:35 pm	"
	Lv Watrous	"	Ar	"	"	12:15 pm	"
1829	Ar SASKATOON . . . . . "	Lv	"	1:50 am	"	8:45 am	"
	Lv SASKATOON	"	Ar	"	"	7:35 am	"
					Sun.	6:00 am	Mon.
1893	Lv SASKATOON . . . . . "	Ar	"	11:10 pm	"		
	Ar Biggar . . . . . Sask.	Lv	"	9:50 pm	"		
2033	Ar Wainwright . . . . . Alta.	Lv	"	9:40 pm	"		
	Lv Wainwright	"	Ar	"	"		
2159	Ar EDMONTON . . . . . Alta.	Lv	"	7:15 pm	"		
	Lv EDMONTON	"	Ar	"	"		
					Sun.		
1925	Lv SASKATOON . . . . . Sask.	Ar	"			5:30 am	Mon.
	Ar No. Battleford . . . . . "	Lv	"			3:20 am	"
2009	Lv No. Battleford . . . . . Sask.	Ar	"			3:05 am	"
	Ar Lloydminster . . . . . Alta.	Lv	"			12:47 am	Mon.
2049	Ar Vermilion . . . . . "	Lv	"			11:55 pm	Sun.
	Lv Vermilion	"	Ar			11:40 pm	"
2179	Ar EDMONTON . . . . . "	Lv	"			8:30 pm	"
	Lv EDMONTON	"	Ar	"	"		
2159	Ar EDMONTON . . . . . "	Lv	"	4:20 pm	Sun.	8:00 pm	"
2289	Ar Edson . . . . . "	Lv	"	1:45 pm	"	5:15 pm	"
	Lv Edson	"	Ar	"	"	5:00 pm	"
2395	Ar JASPER . . . . . "	Lv	"	1:35 pm	"	2:30 pm	"
	Lv JASPER	"	Ar	"	"	2:30 pm	"
2395	Ar JASPER . . . . . Alta.	Lv	"	11:20 am	M.T.	2:30 pm	"
	Lv JASPER	"	Ar	"	P.T.	1:00 pm	"
2529	Ar Blue River . . . . . B.C.	Lv	"	10:10 am	"	6:15 pm	"
	Lv Blue River	"	Ar	"	"	6:15 pm	"

A 1961 schedule of the *Super Continental* showing stops along the Prairie North Line

Today, the *Canadian* operates twice per week. Train #1 departs Toronto on Wednesdays and Sundays and Train #2 departs Vancouver on Mondays and Fridays. The total journey takes about four days. An additional train operates once each week between Vancouver, BC, Edmonton, AB in the summer months.

Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the *Canadian* operates only once per week.

# An Unsustainable Situation

On-time performance (OTP) of the *Canadian* has significantly declined in the last decade, with delays as long as 43 hours. VIA Rail measures “on time” as arriving within 60 minutes of a schedule time. The OTP results of the *Canadian* from 2009 to 2017 are below:

Year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
OTP	84%	84%	74%	70%	60%	33%	38%	54%	8%

These delays result in unreliability of VIA Rail’s service, frustrating tourists and customers who are left waiting at the side of the tracks. Unfortunately, the situation has become so common that it has become part of the brand of VIA Rail’s flagship train with national brand implications.

*“This situation is a serious embarrassment for Canada’s reputation and the Canada brand, in North America and abroad. Travellers return home with the lasting impression wondering how a G7 nation cannot operate its trains on time.”*

-VIA Rail 2018-2022 Corporate Plan

## reliability of The Canadian

Review of VIA Rail Canada

●○○○○○ Reviewed October 23, 2017

Freight rail transportation in Canada has priority over passenger trains which can sometimes lead to substantial delays. We were due to travel at 14:00 on the 27/08/17 from Jasper to Vancouver on the prestigious Canadian only to be informed the day before that the train was running 14 hours late. This was a regular occurrence this summer so beware! luckily we were able to make alternate arrangements by road.

●○○○○○

### VIA RAIL DON'T DO IT.

Via Rail Vancouver to Toronto.

It was the Worst Xmas experience ever, the train was delayed by 20hrs, we missed seeing the Rocky Mountains during the day, we also didn't have a 4 day trip we had a 3 three day trip, No-one knew when we would arrive in Toronto. People were anxious and panicking, some were crying because they had lost their accommodations or transfers already arranged. VIA offered its passengers nothing, they left us stranded and abandoned in the middle of the night, strangers in a strange city when we did arrive in Toronto. No one from Via Rail met the train to investigate the welfare of its passengers, a lot of those people were international who had to find late night bookings in hotels on their own. Via Rail, failed in its duty of care for older women travelling alone, parents with babies and the elderly.

There was no compensation or remuneration offered, in fact they've just ignored us.

ViaRail customers relations is a joke.

●○○○○○

### Absolutely awful

DO NOT!! I REPEAT SO NOT USE THIS SERVICE IF YOU HAVE TO BE ON TIME. I wouldn't even recommend using Via Rail if you had a 5 hour window. The longer journeys are always delayed because of track scheduling issues. The onboard staff are friendly and courteous but the conductors gave no communication about the 6 delay I experienced. We were held up on the tracks for 6 hours, 30 minutes from our destination! I will never use Via Rail again and I suggest you avoid it.

Read less ▲

Date of experience: February 2021

Source: Tripadvisor

VIA Rail's acknowledgement of its own poor OTP has resulted in advisories to passengers not to book same day connections in between Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Edmonton, Jasper, and Vancouver. This has had a large impact on tourists and residents in communities who rely on the public transportation service of VIA Rail to access other urban centres along the route.

In its 2020-24 Corporate Plan, VIA Rail has prioritized the need to develop options to offset the service delivery issues and financial difficulties to the service brought on by poor OTP and schedule changes due to OTP. The only solutions presented to far between CN and VIA Rail are to amend schedules by adding ten hours of travel times to account for long wait times.

*“The Canadian, VIA Rail’s flagship long distance train, has experienced significant challenges due to unsustainable OTP issues, infrastructure work by host railways, schedule and frequency changes, equipment challenges and limitations, as well as service delivery issues.”*

- VIA Rail 2020- 2024 Corporate Plan



Source: Shutterstock

VIA Rail attributes 85% of the delays to freight traffic on CN's rails. Through the prairies, the *Canadian* travels on a single track with short double-track sections called sidings built intermittently along the line to allow opposing trains to pass overtake one another.

The *Canadian* routinely waits on sidings to allow large freight trains to pass, with wait times lasting up to several hours. The more traffic there is, the more the *Canadian* waits and its OTP worsens.



Source: Shutterstock

# A Strategic Solution

## Less Traffic, Fewer Delays

On the CN Main Line between Winnipeg and Edmonton, freight traffic is routinely **over 40 trains per day**, while the CN Prairie North Line sees 3-6 trains per day on the line west of Warman to Edmonton. Traffic on the CN Prairie North Line between Warman and Canora sees even less traffic.

This presents a strategic opportunity for VIA Rail to improve the OTP of the *Canadian* through the prairies by moving its route to the CN Prairie North Line. Less traffic will allow the *Canadian* to travel with fewer stops while waiting for opposing freight traffic to pass.



The proposed route would be diverted from the CN Main Line at Melville, SK north to Canora, SK and then west on the CN Prairie North Line to Edmonton where it connect back to the CN Main Line.



# Connecting More Communities

---

## Essential Public Transportation

The Mandate of VIA Rail is to operate Canada's national passenger rail service, providing intercity and long-haul services as well as regional and essential remote rail transportation.

In addition to serving tourists desiring a transcontinental rail experience, the *Canadian* also serves people living in remote communities as a means of public transportation along the route.

The overall public transportation picture in the prairies is bleak. Greyhound Canada has discontinued all inter-city bus service, and the Saskatchewan Transportation Company was terminated in 2017- eliminating all inter-city bus services in Saskatchewan.

This leaves the *Canadian* as the only viable option for ground transportation in many communities.



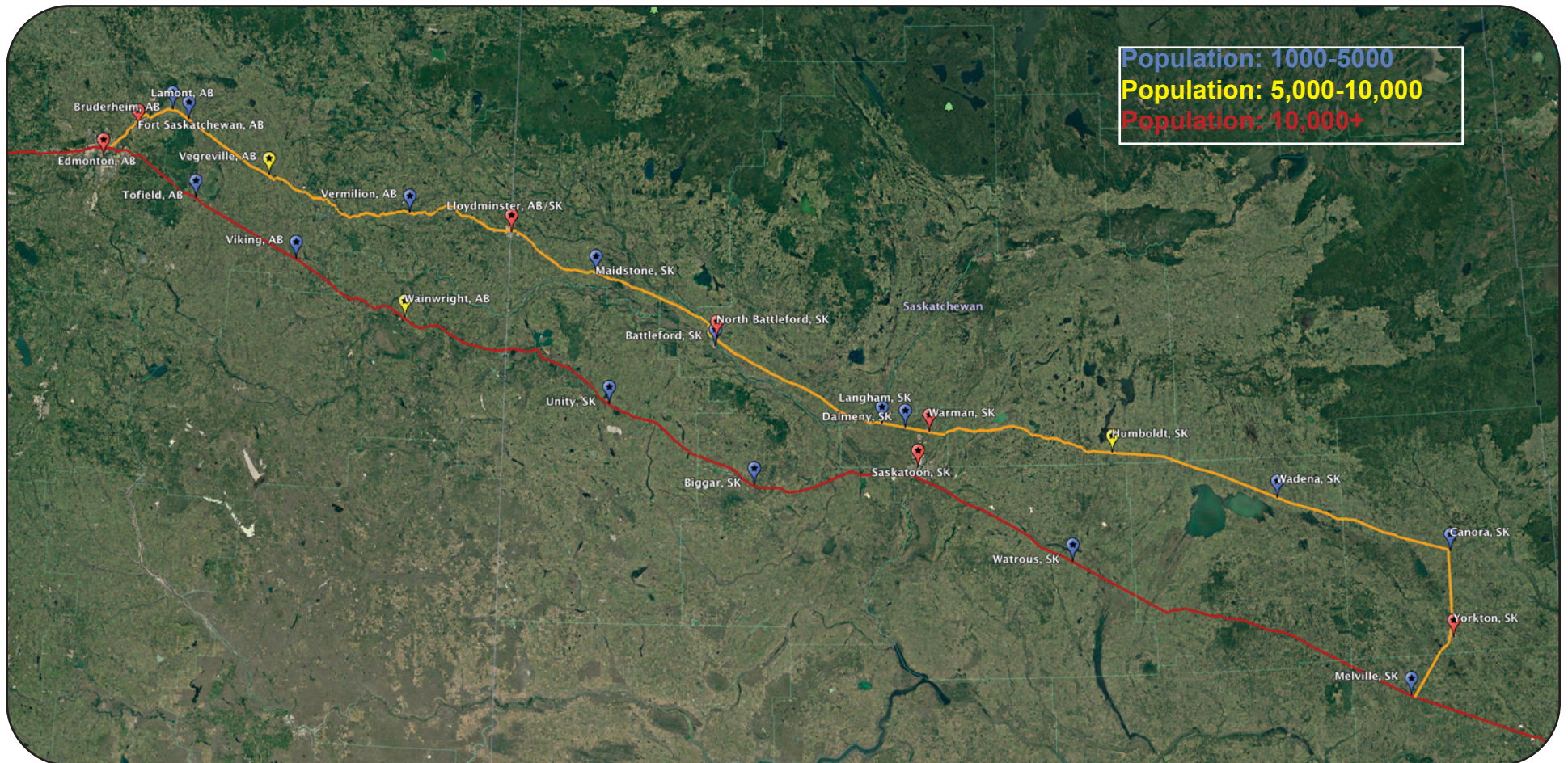
Via Rail passengers disembarking in Edmonton.  
Source: Wikimedia Commons

## More Passenger Potential

There are over 105,000 more people living in the significantly larger urban centres along the CN Prairie North Line vs the CN Main Line (not including the Greater Saskatoon and Edmonton areas, which are shared by both routes).

This allows for VIA Rail to find greater efficiency in providing much-needed public transportation for more Canadians, enabling more people to travel along the route for important medical appointments, to see friends and family, or to conduct business.

The map below shows urban centres with populations over 1000 along both routes, not including individual centres in the Greater Saskatoon and Edmonton areas.



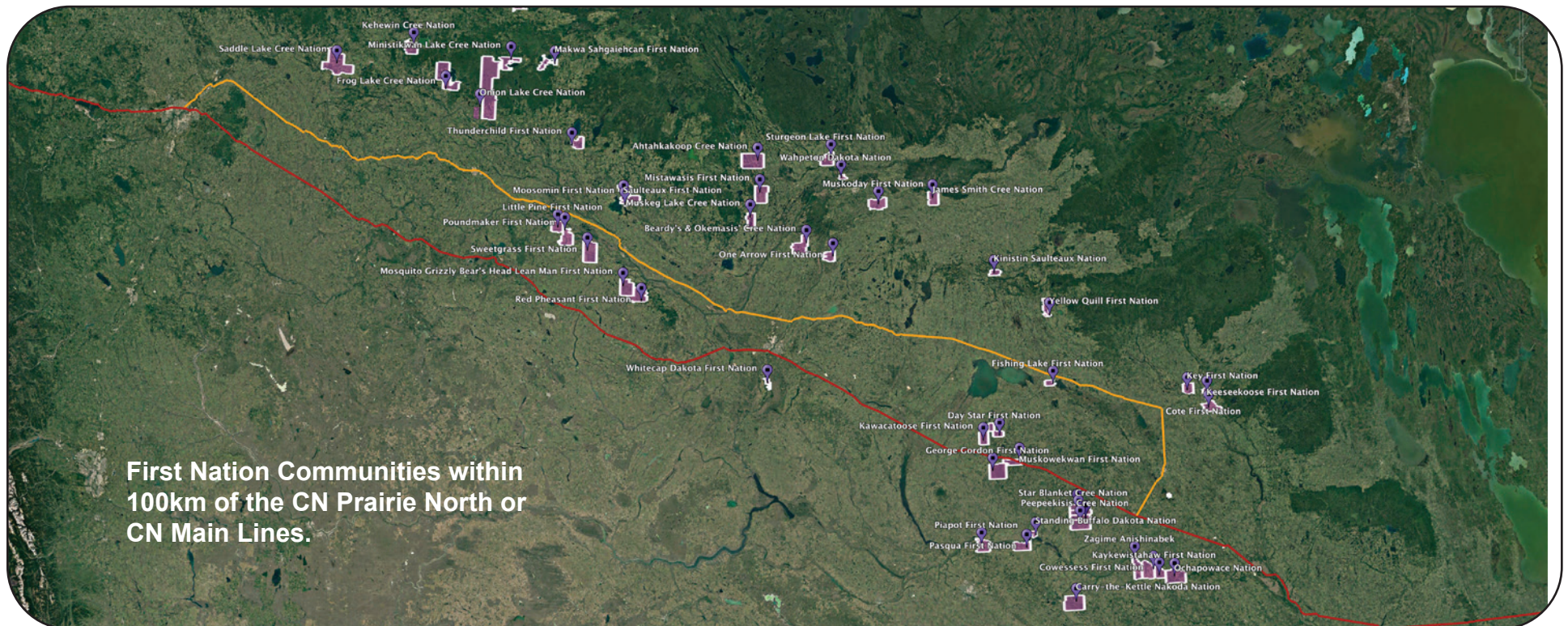
## Connecting with Indigenous communities

VIA Rail has a well documented vision to make cities and communities more accessible, connected, and sustainable. Further, VIA Rail is “seeking to build and strengthen its relations with Indigenous communities by prioritizing inclusive growth and economic reconciliation strategies.” (*Leadership statement to Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, 2018*).

In its Indigenous Relations Policy, VIA Rail has committed to relationship building with Indigenous communities, business development and partnerships with Indigenous communities, investing in local initiatives in Indigenous communities, providing employment for Indigenous people, and providing a means of transportation for people.

VIA Rail offers a 33% discount on regular VIA Rail fares to Indigenous Peoples. Given the loss of intercity bus service in Western Canada, VIA Rail has an important role to play as a means of public transportation for people living in remote Indigenous communities.

Moving the *Canadian* to the CN Prairie North Line provides an opportunity for VIA Rail to put these commitments into action given the close proximity of the line to several Indigenous communities. Many Indigenous communities have made significant business and regional economic development investments, providing an opportunity for VIA Rail to explore partnerships, including procurement and recruitment.



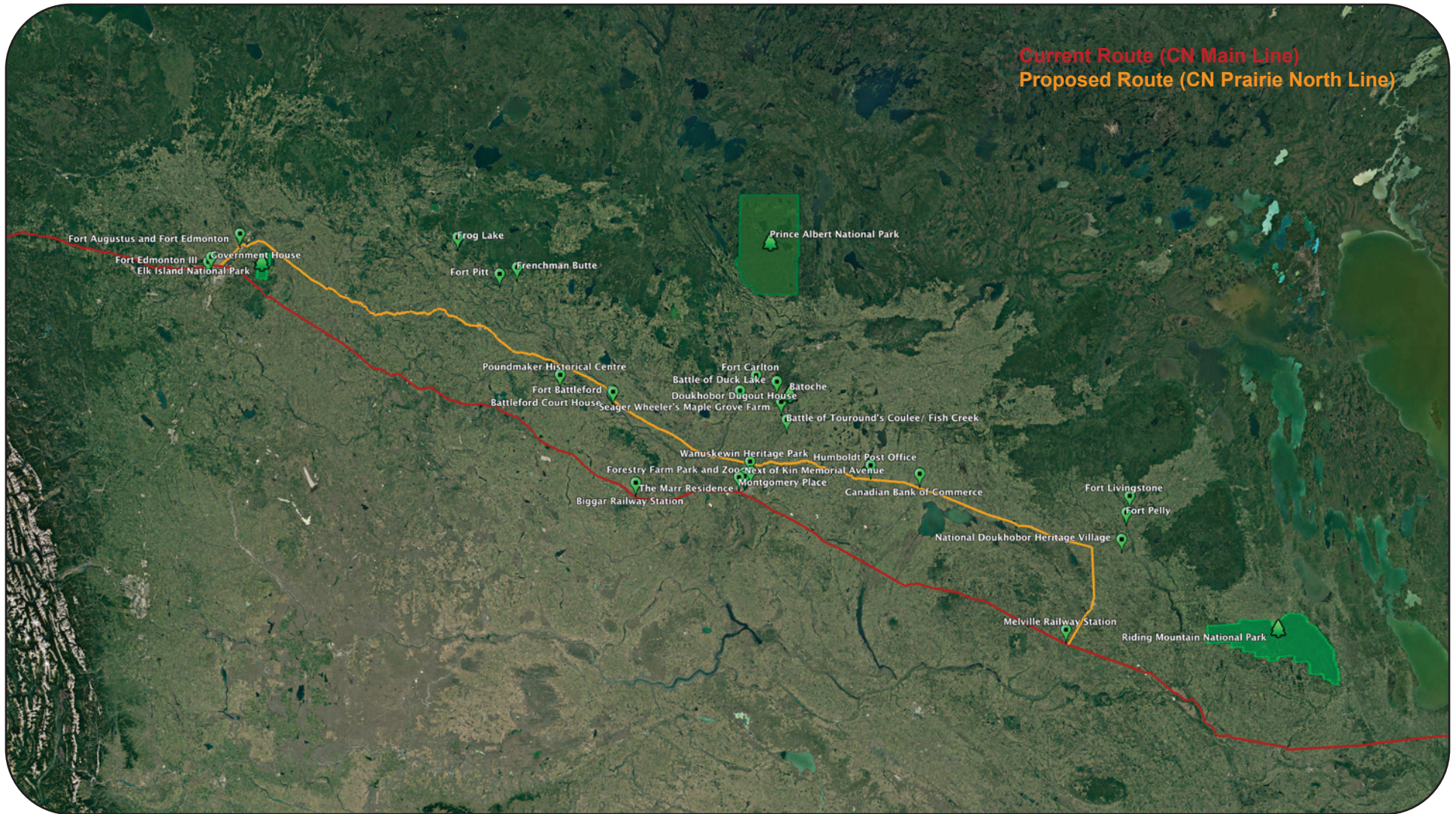
# Telling the Stories of the Region

As the *Canadian* travels along its route, it gives travellers an opportunity to experience the culture and history of our beautiful country.

This is an important opportunity because many passengers of the *Canadian* are from other countries or parts of Canada. Their adventure on the *Canadian* may be their only exposure to the Canadian prairies, making exposure to National Historic Sites and other tourist sites an important component of their experience.



Source: Shutterstock



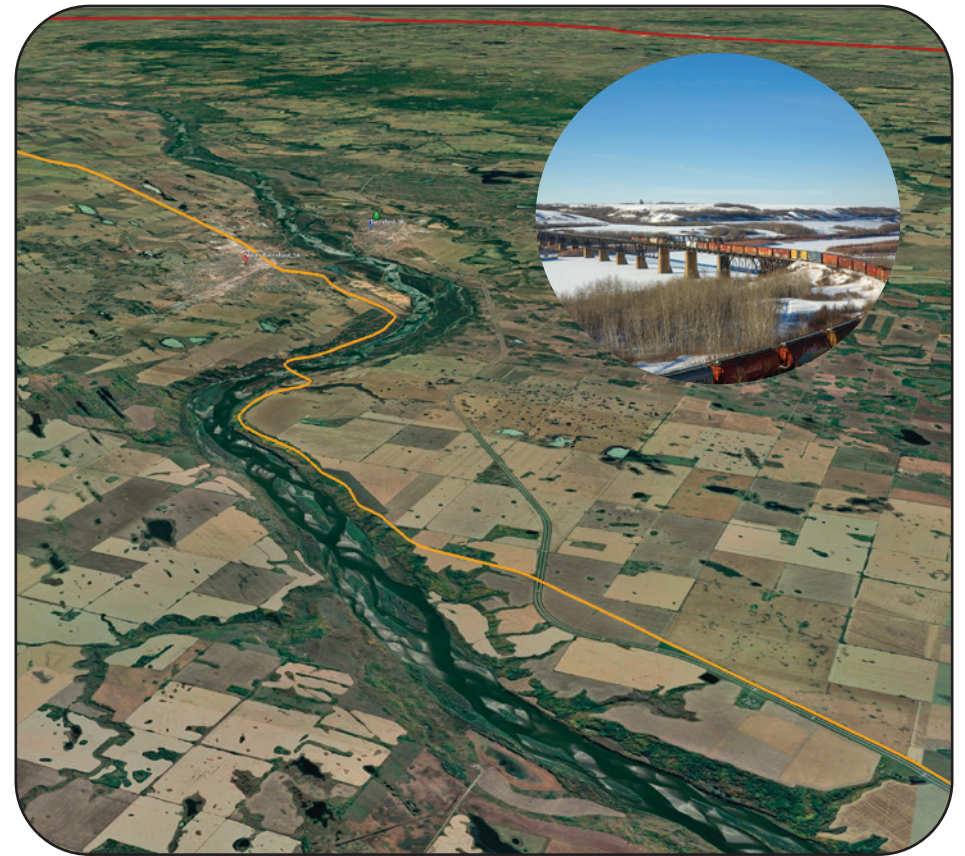
Moving the Canadian on to the CN Prairie North Line provides VIA Rail an opportunity to introduce more storytelling to travellers on the *Canadian* as they travel through the heart of Canada's old North West.

The map above shows all National Historic Sites and National Parks near the CN Prairie North Line and CN Main Lines, many of which are within very close proximity to the CN Prairie North Line.

# A Better View

When CN operated the *Super Continental* on the CN Prairie North Line, the tracks followed the breathtaking North Saskatchewan River Valley for much of the route.

The CN Prairie North Line crosses the North Saskatchewan River three times between Saskatoon and Edmonton, and crosses the South Saskatchewan River once. On the proposed line, travellers will be able to enjoy breathtaking river valley vistas in addition to beautiful prairie landscapes.



Left: CN Prairie North Line following and crossing the North Saskatchewan River Valley near Langham, SK

Above: CN Prairie North Line following and crossing the North Saskatchewan River Valley near North Battleford, SK

# A Win for all Stakeholders

---

This proposal to reroute the Canadian from the CN Main Line to the CN Prairie North Line presents advantages for many stakeholders. They can be summarized as follows:

## VIA Rail Passengers

- More reliable service caused by better OTP from less traffic on the CN Prairie North Line
- More exposure to National Historic Sites and other tourist attractions
- Better scenery through the North and South Saskatchewan River Valleys
- More potential passengers can access the *Canadian* on the CN Prairie North Line, allowing for more people to connect with other communities along the route as the only means of public ground transportation for many

## VIA Rail

- Better OTP from less traffic on the CN Prairie North Line
- More potential for increased ridership by travelling through more populated centres, increasing revenues
- A more sustainable service of its flagship train
- Fewer poor reviews on travel sites, improving VIA Rail's reputation

## Indigenous Peoples

- Better access to public ground transportation to connect people with communities along the route
- Potential for business partnerships and recruitment in accordance with VIA Rail's Indigenous Relations Policy
- Potential to educate passengers on Indigenous culture and history as they travel through traditional territories

## Communities along the route

- Better access to public ground transportation for residents in the area
- Potential for more visitation
- Promotion of local tourism assets and culture

## Canadian National Railways

- Less congestion on its CN Main Line trackage, improving efficiency and safety
- Less congestion in its rail yards, especially the heavily used Saskatoon, Biggar, and Melville rail yards, improving efficiency and safety

## Government of Canada

- Potential to connect more rural Canadians with other communities along the route, especially small urban, rural, and Indigenous communities near the CN Prairie North Line with critical services in Edmonton, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg. This is especially important in the wake of the loss of intercity bus services in Western Canada.
- Ability to expose passengers to more National Historic Sites
- Potential to improve Canada's reputation as a tourist destination for national and international travellers who use the *Canadian*
- Improving economic development in the prairies by reducing congestion on the CN Main Line, allowing for a more timely flow of commodities that are moved by rail.
- Improving rail safety by reducing congestion on the heavily-used CN Main Line