



MEDIA RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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RE: Town fears for future of VIA Rail station project



The Town of Amherst is fearful an agreement that would breathe new life into the former VIA Rail station is taking too long to be implemented.

AMHERST, Nova Scotia – The Town of Amherst is fearful a proposal that would save a historic downtown building could be slipping away.

“It’s just taking so long to get completed,” Mayor David Kogon said of the plan to revitalize the century-old VIA Rail station.



“The private partner we have for this project has been waiting a long time and he can’t wait forever.”

The station, then part of the Intercolonial Railway, was opened in August 1908. One hundred and four years later it was closed by VIA Rail when it reduced rail service in Maritime Canada.

Following its closure in 2012, the town and VIA Rail held several meetings to discuss the future of the station. During those meetings, the town was told the station couldn’t be turned over to a private enterprise because it was registered as a historic property under the Railroad Heritage Act, but it could be conveyed to a provincial or municipal entity at fair market value provided the entity ensured the historic nature of the building had the same protections as it did under the Railroad Heritage Act.

In an effort to save the station, the town issued a request for proposals to see if anyone in the private sector might be willing to rent the building from the town if it took ownership of the property.

The town received one proposal from J.E. Bembridge Enterprises Ltd. In it, the company, owned by Amherst entrepreneur Jeff Bembridge, indicated it would like to move an existing take-out restaurant business into one part of the station and a family restaurant in another part of the building.

In December 2015, the town announced it had reached agreements with VIA Rail and Bembridge that would ensure the revitalization and preservation of the historic building.

In its agreement with VIA Rail, the town agreed to purchase the station and the lands surrounding it that are currently owned by the railway, and replace the Railway Heritage designation with a Municipal Heritage Property designation.

The town also agreed to rent a portion of the station back to the railway so its passengers would have a waiting room and access to washroom as well as space for some technology that is needed for railway operations.

VIA Rail also approved the five-year, lease-to-purchase agreement the town has with Bembridge Enterprises, in which Bembridge would rent the building for five years. At the conclusion of the five years, Bembridge would own the property.

The entire deal was contingent on VIA Rail getting approval from Parks Canada, the minister responsible for the railway’s operation and VIA Rail’s board of directors.

The town declared the station a Municipal Heritage property in March 2017 with the condition that no demolition or substantial alteration in exterior appearance may be undertaken without permission of the town.



In July 2017, Bembridge expressed concern over how long the process was taking. A month later, the town learned that the federal Privy Council had approved the sale of the station to the town.

At the time, Mayor Kogon expressed his pleasure saying he was, “very pleased to hear that this major hurdle has been cleared and we’re looking forward to working with Jeff and VIA to hopefully bring this development to reality.”

Since then, VIA has requested some minor changes to the agreement, which the town agreed to. Parks Canada also gave its approval to the project in November.

Bembridge continues to be frustrated.

“I’m still interested in the project. The town’s worked well with me, but I can’t wait much longer,” he said. “I’m 55 not 20 anymore. If it’s going to happen it has to happen this year. If it doesn’t, I may have to look elsewhere, may have to take this project to another community.

“If the federal government really wants to move the country, the province and this community forward then it’s got to move faster on projects like this one.”

Kogon said the town is now “waiting on VIA to send us the final paperwork so that this agreement can move forward.”

“This whole project is a win-win situation for all parties,” he said. “We get to preserve and revive a historic building, which is going into its third winter without heat. However, we are fearful that VIA doesn’t seem to see this as the priority we see it as.

“This is the only plan we have to save the building. There is no Plan B. We would like VIA to move a little quicker so this important project for the town can move forward.”

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Direct Inquiries to:
Tom McCoag
Corporate Communications Officer
902-694-6265
tmccoag@amherst.ca
Amherst.ca

