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10 June 2015

Mr Yves Desjardins-Siciliano,  
CEO, VIA Rail Canada  
3 Place Ville Marie, Suite 500  
Montreal QC H3B 2C9

Dear Mr Desjardins-Siciliano,

This letter is a request that VIA Rail modify its carry-on policies with respect to folding bicycles. We are addressing you specifically about this because we do not know to whom else we might submit this request with any hope of gaining any consideration, rather than simply eliciting a repetition of the existing policy. We do hope that you will read this letter and consider the issues it raises.

In short, we are asking that VIA:

- 1) relax the maximum size limit for folding bicycles to at least 75 linear inches;
- 2) exclude a folding bicycle from the passenger's carry-on baggage allowance; and
- 3) permit any cover on a folding bicycle which is sufficiently robust and well-fixed to prevent transfer of grease or dirt to other baggage in the train's luggage area.

We would understand if VIA found it necessary to charge a moderate (\$10-20) fee for carriage of a folding bike, to compensate for a possible increase in carry-on items.

The background and rationale for these requests follow.

First, we are passionate about trains and train travel in Canada. Since 2007, when we gave up air and long-distance automobile travel over concern about greenhouse gas emissions, we've typically made two or three round trips annually by train. We soon began to take our bicycles with us, particularly to various regions of Québec, where we've enjoyed the hospitality and scenery of Lac-Saint-Jean, the Saguenay, the Bas-Saint-Laurent, the Gaspésie, and les Iles-de-la-Madeleine.

Our interest in folding bikes came about because we have found it increasingly challenging to take regular bikes. There are several reasons for this:

- 1) a marked reduction in the number of trains with baggage cars. For example, no trains running through Ottawa carry baggage<sup>1</sup>, and only one train per day in each direction between Toronto and Montreal does.
- 2) poor scheduling between baggage-capable trains at connection points. One cannot travel from, e.g., Brockville to Montreal and connect on to Québec City the same day.

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<sup>1</sup> We have heard that, because of this, VIA will courier baggage to the destination. Even if true, this is not an attractive alternative to us for two reasons. First, sending a second vehicle (particularly by road!) is contrary to our environmental principles. Second, the bikes are unlikely to arrive at the same time as us, complicating planning and causing anxiety around when and whether the bikes will actually arrive.

- 3) the increasing prevalence of unstaffed stations, to and from which checked baggage is not permitted. In 2014 we had planned a cycling loop through Chaudière-Appalaches until we discovered we could neither take our bikes to Québec, as noted above, nor to Montmagny, for this reason. Many other stations are similarly denied to cyclists.

In the hope of circumventing these problems, we'd like to tour using our folding bikes. But here too our hopes have been dashed by unreasonably restrictive rules:

- 1) Folding bicycles are subject to the 62" linear dimension limit of a "large article". Whoever drafted this regulation or decided it should apply seems never to have actually looked at folding bikes. Only two of the 18 models listed on <http://www.foldingbike20.com/> meet this requirement, both with 16" wheels. Bikes with 20"-wheels more suitable for touring typically require 67"-75".
- 2) Counting a folding bike as baggage limits the passenger to just one other, "small personal article" of 17 x 6 x 13 inches, barely enough for a single pannier bag. This is insufficient to even "credit-card tour" (staying in B&Bs), let alone camp. Business Class allows a second large article, but is unreasonably expensive.
- 3) The policy on bagging folding bikes is unclear. One VIA representative interpreted "has to be packed in a bag which dimensions can be easily identifiable".as meaning either a bag designed by the maker of the bike, or a hard-sided case. The latter is not feasible for a cyclist to transport, and a hand-sewn canvas bag is apparently liable to be rejected by a particularly picky gate agent. Fortunately, the VIA staff who have actually encountered our home-made bag were very understanding and superlatively helpful. It probably helped that these trips originated from unattended stations, and that on-train personnel seem more tolerant than station agents.

Please consider by contrast Amtrak's policies about folding bikes:

- 1) "Folding bicycles under the dimensions of 34" x 15" x 48" [equivalent to 97" linear at worst case] will be allowed onboard all trains in lieu of a piece of baggage."
- 2) Although the preceding policy still counted the bike itself as an item of baggage, "each passenger may bring a total of 2 carry-on items onboard the train; each item should not exceed 50 lbs and 28 x 22 x 14 inches", equivalent to *two* of VIA's "large items" Two bicycle panniers lashed together will easily fit within this limit.
- 3) No requirement at all is imposed for bagging folding bikes.

It's not often we wish we lived in the United States, but this is one thing they've got right.

In a cyclist's ideal world, *every* VIA train would have a baggage car, and *every* station would allow loading and unloading baggage. We recognize that with today's economy, it would be difficult to fulfill this dream. For now, we only ask that VIA, which frequently describes itself as the "green alternative", help enable environmentally-conscious cyclists like us to enjoy Canada's splendours.

Yours sincerely,

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