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## Canadians overwhelmingly support high-speed rail: poll

By Mike De Souza, Canwest News Service November 8, 2009

OTTAWA - Canadians overwhelmingly support high-speed rail and believe the federal government should provide the startup funding as well as investments on an ongoing basis, concludes a new poll.

The survey, conducted by EKOS for the Railway Association of Canada, found that 86 per cent of Canadians would strongly or somewhat support the introduction of high-speed trains in the country. Only nine per cent said they would be opposed.

Frank Graves, the president of EKOS, said the numbers show the issue can become a big political winner for parties that adopt it in their election platform.

"I would say put this in the store window," said Graves. "It's a timely idea."

EKOS surveyed 1,647 Canadians, 16 years old and older, from Oct. 23 to Oct 28 for the poll that was released last week at a North American high-speed rail summit organized by the Railway Association of Canada, which represents companies and stakeholders in the Canadian railroad industry.

EKOS used a hybrid telephone-online panel for the survey, which randomly selected participants by phone and asked them to answer the questions online or over the phone if they didn't have access to the Internet.

The railway industry association said it organized the conference last week to raise awareness about high-speed trains. While the fastest speed of passenger trains in Canada is about 160 kilometres an hour, many countries have trains that can go twice as fast.

The poll also found that 68 per cent of respondents said all levels of government should be involved in funding high-speed rail. Twenty nine per cent said the federal government should provide funding by itself, while three per cent said it should be solely up to provincial governments.

Among those who supported public funding, 66 per cent believed it should be provided on an ongoing basis, while 34 per cent believed that the government should invest public money just in the startup phase.

"There's no question the public will want more than it can afford," said Graves. "(But) this is one of the strongest levels of support I've seen for something we haven't done."

He said the survey also showed the public generally believes there are strong economic and environmental benefits of investing in the fast-train networks that outweigh any opposing arguments. The survey weighed levels of support before and after mentioning negative arguments such as the high costs and saw the overall support drop from 90 per cent at the beginning of the survey to the 86 per cent level recorded at the end.

Graves also acknowledged that there have been cases in the past where an idea had strong levels of support until there was actually a public debate.

For example, he said the Charlottetown constitutional accord initially had about 70 per cent support in polls before it was defeated in a referendum campaign in 1992.

But Graves said in the case of high-speed rail, the support is so high that he believes it could suffer a "substantial erosion and still remain a clear winner."

Both the Liberals and the Bloc Quebecois have indicated their support for high-speed rail projects. Members of the Harper government have been reluctant to comment on the topic, indicating that they are participating in funding updated research on a central Canadian high-speed rail project with the governments of

Quebec and Ontario that is expected to deliver a report early in 2010.

The last study of high-speed trains in the Quebec City-Windsor corridor estimated in the 1990s that a new system would take a decade to build, costing nearly \$20 billion in investments from the public and private sectors. A recent study has also estimated it would cost billions to build a high-speed link between Calgary and Edmonton.

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