

Round table wants to speed-up railway repairs

GILLES GAGNÉ

NEW RICHMOND – Various citizen groups led by Solidarité Gaspésie are creating a “table for discussion and mobilization on transportation” to ensure the acceleration of the repair of the railway to Gaspé. These groups also want to improve the dissemination of information on this issue, for the benefit of the public.

With an envelope of \$280.5 million, this refurbishment has been experiencing delays since its announcement on May 5, 2017. To date, between \$100 million and \$120 million have been disbursed, out of a total of \$165.1 million invested or committed. The annual amount invested for this railway, owned by Transports Québec since 2015, therefore averages \$20 million.

Carol Saucier, the spokesperson for Solidarité Gaspésie, assures that this repair constitutes the most important economic and social file in the region at the present time because “projects need the railway to develop or count on more efficient, less expensive and less polluting transport, then because the population needs the return of its passenger train.”

He adds that a better exchange of information should make it possible to “accelerate the repair work, set a schedule and take measures to ensure that Transports Québec respects this schedule.”

In 2015, following the acquisition of the Matapédia-Gaspé line, which is 325 kilometres long, Transports Québec put 60% of it in a dormant state. That is the portion between Caplan and Gaspé. This decision was made even though the McNinis cement plant in Port Daniel was under construction and a major company such as windmill blade manufacturer LM Wind Power was negotiating for a huge export contract to the southern United States.

In 2016-2017 the two companies became the main customers of the municipally-controlled carrier, the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, but the cement, and the blades between 2016 and 2022, are or have been transported by truck to the rail transshipment centre in New Richmond. This change of load entails significant



Workers from the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie will be called upon to speed up repair work on the railway.

costs.

Closely monitor the progress of the rehabilitation

“Among the objectives of the discussion and mobilization table, we want to share information from the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie but also the expertise of the public. We want to share our concerns and expectations. We want information as the file evolves,” says Carol Saucier.

He notes that the participation of citizen groups in rail demands takes some pressure off local politicians.

“Indeed, there are actions that could be taken, particularly for the section between Port Daniel and Gaspé, representations that citizen groups can make more easily to Transports Québec than to elected officials, considering that the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie is linked to the municipalities and that it maintains a business relationship with this ministry,” noted Mr. Saucier.

For repair purposes, Transports Québec has divided the 324 kilometres of track between Matapédia and Gaspé into three sections. The Matapédia-Caplan portion, 128 kilometre long, is repaired and functional. The upgrade of section 2, between Caplan and Port Daniel, 72 kilometre long, is on track. This project will be completed in 2024, at a time that has not yet been determined. The 124 kilometres between Port Daniel and Gaspé constitute the portion affected by uncertainty as to the deadline for carrying out the repairs.

“With the information we have, the 2024 schedule

holds up for section 2. For section 3, Transports Québec published a call for interest in the fall and 12 companies responded. We learned during a meeting held on January 20 that the Ministry of Transport intends to combine certain calls for tenders to make them into more attractive packages, to attract big players and allow them to come forward in some of these tenders,” explains Carol Saucier.

Delays accumulate

Solidarité Gaspésie and associated groups, namely the Gaspé Citizens' Committee for Development, the Coalition of Gaspésians for the return of the train and the Côte-de-Gaspé Chamber of Commerce work with the prefects, members of the Regroupement des MRC de la Gaspésie, to put the upgrade folder for sections 2 and 3 on the fast track.

“As regards the evaluation of the works of section 3, we know that the costs will increase. The signal we receive for the work remains the same: the government is going to go to Gaspé. It is expected that in early May, we will know more about the work to be done with a timeline for Gaspé and partial timelines, to reach intermediate points,” says Mr. Saucier, who hopes that the Ministry of Transport will do what is necessary to respect a tight schedule.

“For section 2, there were long periods without a call for tenders, which led to delays in the schedule. For section 3, we don't want it to take 10 years. We will not give an idea of the date. We will wait to see the extent of the work,” confirms the

increase the annual number of loaded wagons. The cessation of blade traffic in May 2022 could not be compensated by a greater volume of cement and the SCFG suffered a loss of traffic of 31.3%, from 4,636 carloads in 2021 to 3,190 last year.

Carol Saucier firmly assures that the exchange and mobilization table is also working to bring the VIA Rail passenger train back to New Carlisle as soon as the track is functional there, at the end of 2023 if possible. For several years, the management of this public carrier has maintained that it will return between Matapédia and Gaspé only when the entire line has been repaired. The previous leadership, under Yves Desjardins-Siciliano, had expressed an openness to returning in stages.

The contribution of the SCFG technical team, which received an envelope of \$19 million to participate more in the repair of the railroad, should also make it possible to accelerate the pace of work.

Meanwhile, Transports Québec announced on February 14 the immediate launch in some cases and imminent in other cases of repair work on the last culverts and small bridges located between Caplan and Port Daniel. A call for tenders is, therefore, launched to repair the bridges over the Paspébiac river and the Saint-Godefroi river in Hope Town. In the coming weeks, other calls for bids will be published for the Saint-Siméon river, Cullen's Brook and Day brook bridges in Bonaventure.