

Delay in line reopening attributable to Saint Mary's Cement, says officials

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PORT DANIEL - The Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie (SCFG) and Transports Québec estimate that the major works currently being carried out by contractors could have allowed a train to run between Caplan and Port Daniel by the end of the year.

However, the postponement of traffic resumption to Port Daniel is essentially tied to the fact that the silo that must be built by Saint Mary's Cement, the owner of the Port Daniel cement plant, will not be ready before the spring.

"The major works will be completed by the end of the year. Operations will not resume until next spring because we have nothing to transport this winter on the section. We are waiting for work to be



Photo: G. Gagné

Éric Dubé points out that the SCFG workers will benefit from more time to finish track work, considering that Saint Mary's Cement's silo won't be ready until the spring.

completed by the cement plant. Their loading silos are out to tender and it will not be until spring that all of this will be operational," says Éric Dubé, the president of the

SCFG.

The last works this coming winter, such as installing rails on culverts or the recommissioning of level crossings, will simply be postponed.

"It's common sense. Our teams worked very hard this summer. We did dozens of projects. Asking them to do work in winter conditions that will not be necessary for our transportation operations. We found that it was not logical," says Mr. Dubé.

A transshipment centre will be built in Port Daniel and eventually in Gaspé. "There are things that are being considered so that by springtime, if we have requests from customers further east, we can move the transshipment centre to Port-Daniel," says the SCFG president.

Currently, cement is transported by truck to the New Richmond transshipment cen-

tre, which would still be maintained but for other commodities. "We will remove several trucks between Port-Daniel and New Richmond next spring. For the rest, we continue to work on business development," says Mr. Dubé.

The rehabilitation work monitoring committee still concludes that the railway upgrading will be completed to Gaspé by the end of 2026.

"That is still the ministry's line of communication. Everything is being done in that direction. The last two calls for tenders are being analyzed by the Ministry of Transport.

Does it respect the budgets? The ministry will be able to answer that. But a question has been raised that if there are issues that we do not know about, whether budgetary or

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RAIL DELAY

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technical, the ministry has reiterated that the objective of rehabilitating to Gaspé will be achieved,” notes the president.

Some contracts have already been awarded on the section between Port Daniel and Gaspé. “It would be illogical not to put this section into service after investing tens and tens of millions,” stresses Mr. Dubé. A retaining wall has already been built over a kilometre in Gaspé, a large culvert has been changed, and the bridge over the Grande Rivière is under repair.

“As long as the last major contracts have not been awarded, we can always have questions about the deadlines and costs, but we should have an answer by early 2025 at the latest,” remarks Éric Dubé.

Transports Québec

Transports Québec spokesperson Nicolas Vigneault assures that the contractors whose services were retained by the ministry would have completed their projects before the end of the year, whether or not there was a delay in developing the silo.

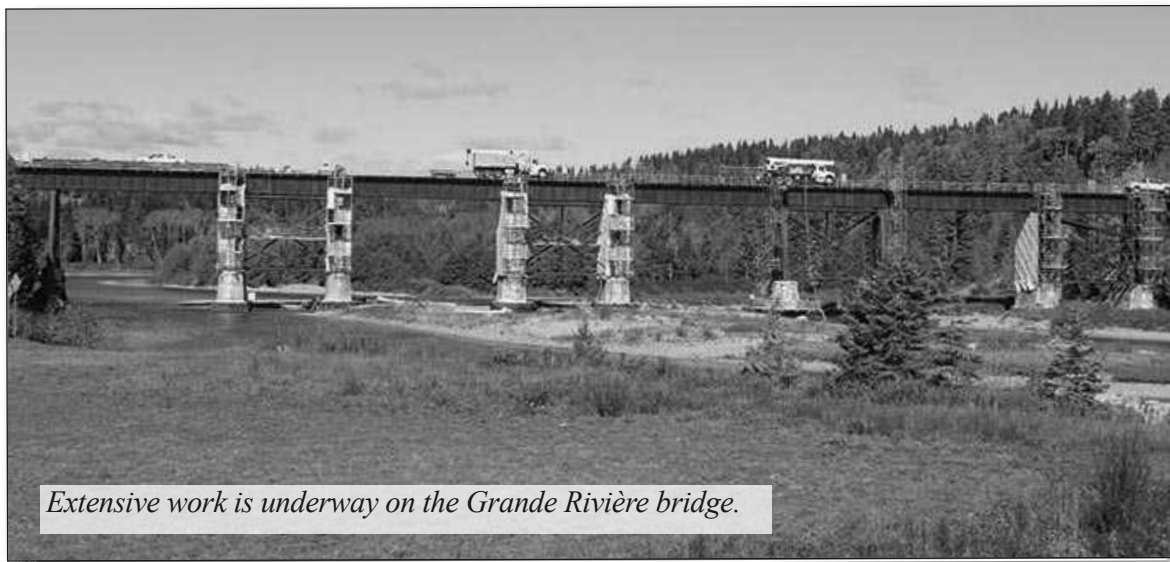
“In fact, we are in the process of finalizing the section. In this type of project, there are verification audits. If we had opened the section immediately, there would have been speed restrictions at certain level crossings (...) Since there is no major impact on the operator at the commercial level (Saint Mary’s Cement), we will complete the work instead of having speed reductions,” Mr. Vigneault points out.

The Gaspé SPEC asked him when, in the spring, train traffic could resume, since there is a significant difference between March 23 and June 19, for example. “We don’t have a date, but we will know in a few weeks,” he adds.

VIA Rail

No discussions have been held since the summer for a return, even partial, of Via Rail.

“They are still sticking to the same old story: it’s Gaspé or nothing,” says Mr. Dubé. A year ago, on November 1, 2023, representatives of the Coalition of Gaspésians for the return of VIA Rail’s passenger train met with the president of VIA Rail, Mario Péroquin, who committed to coming to the Gaspé Peninsula by the end of January 2024. That commitment has been postponed a few times since.



Extensive work is underway on the Grande Rivière bridge.

Photo: G. Gagné

At the time, VIA Rail cited issues to staff recruitment, rolling stock, the state of the stations and safety, since the line was and remains under work. Members of the Coalition suggested over the ensuing winter that some of the issues such as staff recruitment, rolling stock and the state of the stations, could be dealt with while contractors take care of the railway refurbishment.

The size of the investment

As for critics who question the investment of nearly \$1 billion, Éric Dubé is not overly concerned.

“I have always said, for nearly 10 years, that this will be a wonderful development tool for the region. We will have a highway for the next 100 years with immense potential. We are talking about climate change, the (St. Lawrence) river level that will drop (which could advantage ports like Gaspé), and the reduction of GHGs (Green House Gases). We are part of the solution. At that point, everything will depend on the local political will to take steps to develop it,” explains Mr. Dubé, who is also mayor of New Richmond and Bonaventure MRC prefect.

He points out that the company operates the railway and does not do economic development.

A lot of progress has been made in the last 10 years, when the company went technically bankrupt and the railway was bought by the Quebec government.

“I arrived in February 2014 and, in the space of a year, we managed to convince the government to (save) the company that was technically bankrupt.

We had revenues of \$700,000. This year, we have exceeded \$15 million and we have 60 employees. That’s a lot of spinoffs. I have a hard time understanding when people say it’s a fiasco or that it costs too much,” says Mr. Dubé, who points out that people wanted to turn it into a bike path in 2015.

“Would the economy be better off with a nice bike path? I will never know, but once all the investment is made and economic activity is developed around it, I hope people will judge all that,” says Mr. Dubé.

Tourist train

The tourist train project with the acquisition of 12 automotive passenger cars from a Vermont firm remains in the plans. A purchase offer was due to expire in September.

“We gained a delay to work on our file,” specifies Éric Dubé. The SCFG has a project of nearly \$14 million, including \$8 million for the acquisition and redevelopment of the 12 automotive Budd cars stored in Vermont. The SCFG hopes to obtain \$5 million from the Quebec government.

“The challenge is really to

seek financing. We understand that the economic issues of our governments are known,” says Mr. Dubé about the recent Quebec government decision to adopt cost-cutting measures.

The purchase option costs \$12,000 per month. “It’s still a significant investment because it’s a great project that would bring traffic in a different way on the railway because our goal is to run trains,” he says.

Background

On June 27, 2023, in Gaspé, Quebec’s Transport Minister Geneviève Guilbault confirmed a total investment of \$872 million to rehabilitate the railroad, including approximately \$517 million for section three between Port Daniel-Gascons and Gaspé. In total, 21 infrastructures must be repaired or rebuilt on that Port

Daniel-Gaspé stretch. The railroad must be moved to two locations on this segment.

“Despite the cost overrun on the call for tenders mentioned (the last of the four major calls for tenders), the project is currently within the established budgetary guidelines and no additional funding is required. We know how important the railway is for the people of our region, not only for goods, but for passengers as well. We promised the railway and we’re going to do it!”, says Bonaventure Member of the National Assembly Catherine Blouin.

After nine deadlines for the opening of bids for the call for tenders launched on March 21, the envelopes for two proposals received by the Ministry of Transport were opened on September 18.

Pomerleau is asking for \$258 million and Partenariat Ferroviaire Gaspésie is suggesting \$286 million to carry out the projects within the estimate.

The work consists of repairing two bridges in Gascons, one between Gascons and Newport, which is one of the longest structures of the whole line, and another in Newport and the one between Douglstown and Haldimand.

In addition, one of the two bridges between Grande-Rivière and Sainte-Thérèse-de-Gaspé must be replaced.