

More money to be invested in rail after 2026 *MNAs pledge to stay committed*

● NELSON SERGERIE

GASPÉ - The Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) Members of the National Assembly (MNAs) for the Gaspé Peninsula have given their assurance that the Quebec government will not abandon the Gaspé railway once the refurbishment is complete to Gaspé in 2026.

A project notice submitted to the Quebec Environment Ministry by Transports Quebec indicates that work will be required between now and 2030 to secure six segments of the Gaspé rail line on Section 3 between Port-Daniel-Gascons and Gaspé.

These funds will be added to the vast \$872 million project aimed at restoring safe rail traffic by 2026 on the entire section between Matapédia and Gaspé.

Additional investments will be needed to ensure long-term sustainability for the next 75 years on Section 3, which is the most vulnerable to erosion and coastal flooding.

"It will be integrated into the maintenance of erosion assets, so budgets will certainly have to be in place but, at the moment, I have no concerns in that respect," explains Stéphane Sainte-Croix, the MNA for Gaspé.

"The Coastal Protection Project will aim to maintain the integrity of the railway infrastructure, so these envelopes will come a little later," added his colleague, Catherine Blouin, MNA for Bonaventure. The two MNAs did not want to go into detail about the additional investments.

Stakeholders familiar with the issue suggest that once all necessary work to secure the rail long-term is completed, the total envelope will approach \$1 billion.

A document consulted by SPEC in May noted that coastal protection work would be carried out over approximately 11 linear kilometres, spread over six separate, non-contiguous sites along the railway's right-of-way.

At these six sites, the cumulative intervention distance within the two-year flood limit is greater than 500 metres or approximately 3.2 linear kilometres and, because of the variants studied, it is estimated that a cumulative surface area equal to or greater than 5,000 m² may also be exceeded.

The targeted sites are: Pabos Mills West (225 metres), Pabos Mills (1,210 metres),

Chandler (1,190 metres), banc de Pabos (1,340 metres), Barachois (5,700 metres) and Douglstown (1,480 metres).

The document filed by the Ministry of Transport states, "The project includes work to protect against coastal hazards. It is planned that this work will be carried out following the rehabilitation of the Gaspésie railway between Port-Daniel-Gascons and Gaspé (editor's note: scheduled for the end of 2026). The goal is to alleviate the problems of coastal erosion and flooding at six separate, non-contiguous sites in the marine/coastal environment.

Several solutions are being analyzed to deal with the six problematic sites including relocating the railway outside the constraint zone associated with coastal hazards, local setback of the railway line, and raising the railway line.

The solutions and variants will be analyzed based on four main aspects: technical, transport and rail safety, environmental and socio-economic.

Considering that work is currently underway to refurbish the railway, and that work to protect the railway infrastructure against climate hazards will be carried out afterwards, work methods will be adapted to avoid compromising, as far as possible, the

maintenance of rail service.

Several steps are involved before deciding on a definitive solution, including hydraulic studies, ecological characterization, environmental studies, archaeological potential assessments, sediment transport analyses, geomorphology, bathymetry, and surveying and geotechnical studies.

Following this, the preliminary and final design of the project including plans and specifications, prior information sessions, impact studies and obtaining environmental and government authorizations will need to be completed.

Once these steps have been completed, the Ministry notes that, depending on the results of the preliminary and impact study, measures adapted to the different sites will be put forward to ensure the long-term viability of the railway, including raising and relocating the tracks, building new embankments, installing beach nourishment, building retaining walls and other applicable measures.

Other solutions and new combinations could be studied as part of the preliminary design.

In the preliminary analyses of the hydraulic studies carried out between 2019 and 2022, the Ministry indicates that

maintaining the sites in their current state would be insufficient to ensure the long-term survival of the railway.

According to a study by UQAR's Laboratoire de dynamique et de gestion intégrée des zones côtières (LDGIZC), carried out in 2021, the six sites targeted by this project are located in exposed areas or areas that will be exposed in the next ten years.

For this reason, these sites are exposed to erosion and flooding for two-year recurrence events, which can lead to several issues such as damaged tracks, damaged or destroyed berm, unfavourable coastal drift and insufficient space for vegetation to recover.

The document mentions that when Section 3 of the railway was in operation, the operational approach in the event of a storm was to close traffic on the section. Once the storm was over, an inspection of the closed section was carried out and maintenance work was carried out before allowing rail traffic to pass through again, demonstrating the importance of the problem of coastal flooding along this section and the high risk it represents for rail traffic.

It usually took two to three days to restore the railway after a major storm.

The ministry points out that although some of the variants under study propose moving the existing track, it will nevertheless be recommended as part of the project that the work be carried out within the existing right-of-way wherever possible.

This approach will reduce the potential impact on the neighbouring human and biophysical environments in the area.

One of the key principles that will be put forward as part of the design will be to minimize both permanent and temporary encroachment into sensitive environments, with priority given to coastal wetlands and water bodies.

According to the preliminary timetable submitted by the Ministère des Transports to the Ministère de l'Environnement, the environmental impact study and preliminary design will be submitted in December.

The Notice of acceptance is expected in March 2025, and a ministerial recommendation in September 2026.

In the meantime, the final preliminary design will be submitted in December 2025, with preliminary and final plans and specifications in December 2026 for construction between 2027 and 2030.