

Railway rehabilitation underway between Port-Daniel and Gaspé

GILLES GAGNÉ

PORT-DANIEL: – Quebec’s Ministry of Transport and Sustainable Mobility awarded a contract worth nearly \$75 million in early May for repairs on the third section of the Gaspésie railway rehabilitation project. This section spans 127 kilometres between Port-Daniel and Gaspé.

The contract has been awarded to Sainte-Flavie-based Groupe Sema Structures Ferroviaires, which will be responsible for construction sites in Grande-Rivière, Percé and Gaspé. These works involve nine structures, namely the reconstruction of five culverts and a bridge, as well as the rehabilitation of three other bridges. It is expected that the interventions will begin during the summer and be completed by the end of 2026.

The bidding process for this contract closed on March 7, marking the first major call for bids on the Port-Daniel to Gaspé stretch of railroad. This call for tenders was launched on November 17, 2023. Three additional calls for bids are underway for that stretch, either published or in preparation.

The contract awarded to Sema includes some well-known structures, including the large bridge passing over the Grande Rivière, along Highway 132, in the town bearing the same name, and the Prevel trestle which is less visible but at least as long, as it is located at a certain distance from Highway 132 in the Anse à Brillant area.

Three construction firms bid on that contract, and Groupe Sema secured the tender for \$74,877,385.

The amount necessary to upgrade the whole line between Matapédia and Gaspé reaches \$871.8 million, as announced on June 27, 2023, in Gaspé by Transport Minister Geneviève Guilbault. The allocated funds for the Port-Daniel to Gaspé section of the railroad amounts to \$517 million.

The section between New Richmond and Port-Daniel is still undergoing repairs and is expected to reopen by late fall of this year.

Transports Québec, which acquired the line during the spring of 2015, had previously announced that the line was functional between Matapédia and Caplan. However, since

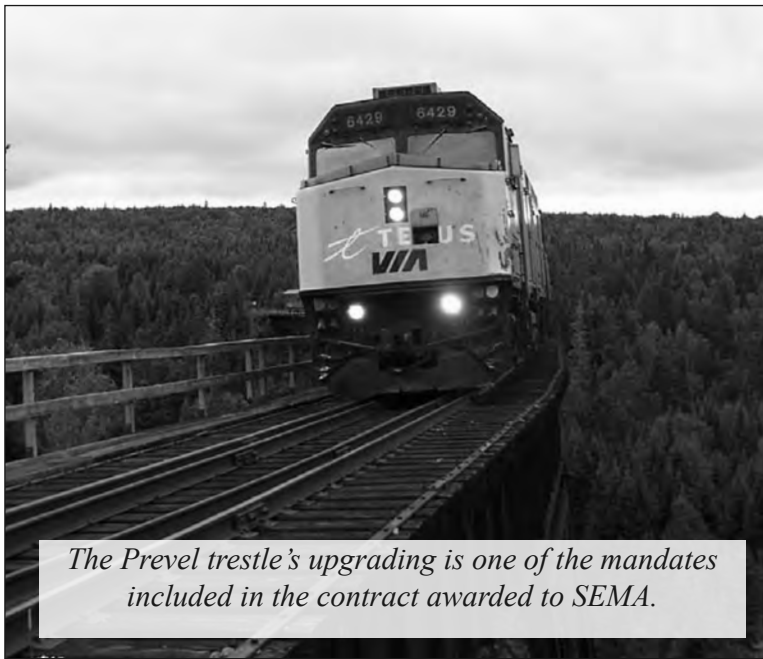


Photo: Gilles Gagné

the summer of 2023, a culvert replacement and a decision to move the track in the Black Cape area have led to the closure of the line in that eastern part of New Richmond until midsummer.

Optimism for the 2026 deadline

Éric Dubé, president of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, is more confident than ever that the line will be reopened to Gaspé by the end of 2026, the commitment made by Minister Guilbault.

“Other contracts will be awarded later this year over that Port-Daniel-Gaspé section. From what I understand, two bids are closed and under analysis for the calls for bids 2 and 3. Call for tender number 2 could be awarded at \$102 million. That’s for one contract,” he specifies.

Some smaller contracts, including the replacement of thousands of ties and some grade work, were previously carried out, a few of them as far back as 2020.

“I think the Ministry (of Transport) will respect the deadline now. Delivering for 2026 is part of the conditions included in the calls for tenders. One must be aware that all the contracts will be carried out during the same period,” notes Éric Dubé.

When the upgrading of the entire line was announced by ‘then-premier’ Philippe Couillard, on May 5, 2017, the deadline for the reopening of the line to Port Daniel was set for 2020, but reopening it to Gaspé remained essentially vague.

In April 2019, current Premier François Legault affirmed that the reopening of

the line to Gaspé would take seven years, meaning trains would only circulate in Gaspé in 2026.

That statement caused a lot of criticism and, in August 2019, Premier Legault modified his commitment, stating a target of 2025 for Gaspé and 2022 for the return of rail service in Port-Daniel.

The pandemic, although productive for the contractors that had been selected before March 2020, greatly slowed down Transports Québec’s call for tender process. The ministry went 20 months without issuing any call for tenders, from June 2020 and February 2022, consequently postponing the resumption of traffic to Port-Daniel until the end of 2024.

Reaching the Port-Daniel cement plant is expected to boost traffic out of the Saint Mary’s Cement facility and reduce the number of trucks serving some customers. Some cement volumes are transported entirely by truck because of the cost associated with transshipment in New Richmond, where the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie operates a silo to load freight cars.

At the beginning of 2024, up to \$310 million had been invested and committed to the upgrade of the railroad between Matapédia and Gaspé.

In the Quebec Infrastructure Plan published following the March 2024 budget, \$233 million is allocated for the Port-Daniel-Gaspé section of the network this year, and \$259 million in 2025. Just over \$83 million is also planned for the completion of the Caplan-Port-Daniel section, including \$73 million this year.