

The tourist train project is moving forward

● NELSON SERGERIE

NEW RICHMOND - The Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie (SCFG) is seeking \$5 million from the Quebec government to purchase 12 self-propelled passenger cars from a Vermont company.

"We are actively working on the project. We had hoped to apply to a Ministry of Tourism program, but the deadline was June 19. We haven't been able to put the whole project together. We're working on other options, and the next step will be to present it to government decision-makers," says SCFG president Éric Dubé.

The financial assistance for the project, estimated at between \$12 million and \$14 million, will be used for the acquisition and transformation of the cars.

The purchase price is set at \$8 million, with the remainder going towards modifications, including adding toilets and a dining service, as these cars are used for commuter train service in Texas.

The SCFG has had a purchase option since last autumn with AllEarth Rail at a cost of US\$12,000 per month. This option expires at the end of September.

"We don't want to lose the option. We know it's highly sought after. We have a good relationship with the promoter.

Will we consider an extension? Everything is on the table. We're not negotiating yet, because we have a bit of time," says Mr. Dubé.

Any amounts paid will be deducted from a future transaction if that transpires.

The Quebec government previously helped finance the Amiral tourist train project. The last time that train ran was in 2014 and it was immobilized due to the state of the railroad on the main operating section between Gaspé and Percé.

Parked at the Gaspé intermodal station for 10 years, it was brought back to the New Richmond yard this spring to assess its condition.



The fate of the Amiral tourist train is uncertain at a time when SCFG could buy self-propelled cars from Vermont.

Photo: Facebook

The train was acquired in 2013 for \$1.8 million.

Mr. Dubé remains confident that the Quebec government will subsidize a new tourist train concept. "We'll be hoping that our sales arguments are good. The big difference is that we (Quebec's Ministry of Transport) will

have invested nearly \$900 million to upgrade the rail system. The economic climate has changed a lot. We have a very different project from the old one. In terms of our opportunities, we'll be able to operate in several places at the same time, with a wider range of services," explains the pres-

ident.

The flexibility provided by the self-propelled rail cars will be the major selling point.

"Unlike the Amiral train, which is a monolithic unit, whether you have 50 or 300 passengers, you have to leave with the whole train but with the 70-passenger cars, one person leaves with a train, and if you have 100 passengers, you use two cars and it's still the same resource," says Mr. Dubé.

The 12 cars could be spread throughout the region, depending on needs.

"It's a versatility that we didn't have with the old train, which was just as expensive because the fixed costs were higher on a train like the Amiral," explains the president.

The SCFG aims to buy the 12 automotive cars but doesn't rule out selling some if needs are lower. The purchase includes an inventory of parts worth nearly \$2 million.

"Cars of this quality, which were upgraded in the late 1990s in Montreal, are very rare. They have been refurbished. When you have an appraisal done, the value is much higher than what you would pay," suggests Mr. Dubé.

The organization (SCFG) hasn't decided on the fate of the Amiral should it acquire these self-propelled cars.

"We're going to work on one piece at a time. We're working on this project, but the Amiral still has potential because, if the first plan doesn't work, we'll have a Plan B. We'll see what happens next with the company. We'll see what happens next with the Amiral," says the president.

If the self-propelled cars are purchased this autumn, they could be on the tracks as early as next year, between Port-Daniel-Gascons and Matapédia, once adapted to the needs by Rail GD of New Richmond.