

## Coalition for the Return of VIA Rail passenger train to hold public meetings

GILLES GAGNÉ

CARLETON – The Coalition of Gaspésians for the Return of VIA Rail’s Passenger Train will hold a series of public meetings starting on January 19 to provide updates on the latest developments regarding the train’s eventual return.

Micheline Saint-Onge, a volunteer for the Coalition, also wants to provide people with a means to take action and demand the return of the passenger train as quickly as possible.

“People are anxious to benefit from the train service. They express that need each and every time that I meet people in public,” explains Ms. Saint-Onge, a Saint-Omer native who came back to her hometown after a career as a nurse outside the Gaspé Peninsula.

She is deeply dedicated to her volunteerism for the Coalition, spending countless hours reading the organization’s press review in order to provide solid information during the upcoming public meetings.

“I have read the whole press review of the Coalition to make sure that I have a good picture of the situation, and also to communicate the right information to the people who will attend the meetings,” states Micheline Saint-Onge.

The press gallery contains



Micheline Saint-Onge is compiling notes and drawing historical and statistical charts in preparation for the upcoming round of public meetings.

Photos: G. Gagné

hundreds of articles about the Gaspé Peninsula railway file, with archives that date back two decades.

The Matapedia to Gaspé train service was suspended gradually between December 2011 and September 2013, due to the state of the infrastructure. The first service cut was applied in December 2011, two weeks before Christmas, when VIA Rail suspended service between New Carlisle and Gaspé because a bridge located in Chandler required upgrading work.

At the beginning of August

2013, the use of a saline solution as a defoliant by the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, prompted Transports Québec, since the line is operated under provincial jurisdiction, and VIA Rail to suspend the passenger train service between Matapedia and New Carlisle. The suspension was at first temporary. Then a September decision was made to suspend the service until additional and satisfactory infrastructure work is carried out.

Eleven years later, and the tumultuous chapters that punctuated that period, VIA Rail, a

public corporation belonging to the federal government, is still communicating the message to the effect that its train service in the Gaspé Peninsula will only resume once the line is open to Gaspé, a message Ms. Saint-Onge hardly accepts.

“They left in steps; they can come back in steps. The only thing we hear from VIA Rail authorities is that they will come back once the line is safe. Soon, the line will be open to New Carlisle. Transports Québec is investing close to \$1 billion on the line between Matapedia and Gaspé. It will be the safest line in Canada! As far as safety is concerned, VIA Rail forgets that our safety as citizens forced to drive if we want to travel is also at stake, like in the winter. Not everybody can travel between our region and Montreal by bus. It is exhausting and not comfortable,” she points out.

Micheline Saint-Onge, a train user since her early childhood, is encouraged by the reactions of people she has met over the last two years of volunteer work.

“People tell me how useful it has always been to them and how they miss it,” she says.

### Close to 19,000 names on petition

So far, the Coalition of

Gaspésians for the return of VIA Rail’s passenger train has gathered 18,800 signatures on a petition asking the public transporter and the federal government to make the appropriate efforts to come back gradually east of Matapedia.

“We are entitled to that service as soon as possible. Since 2013, VIA has received the money earmarked for the Gaspé Peninsula service without offering it. It must have reached \$40 million by now. It would be normal to bring it back as soon as the train can reach New Carlisle, which is coming soon,” affirms Ms. Saint-Onge.

The tri-weekly Matapedia-Gaspé train’s ridership reached nearly 29,000 passengers between 2000 and 2010, despite subpar service during busier periods, as the transporter was not taking the appropriate measures to reach Gaspé and was frequently short-turning the train in New Carlisle.

Ms. Saint-Onge is very disappointed by the fact that the president of VIA Rail, Mario Pélouquin, who had committed to coming to the Gaspé Peninsula over the first two months of 2024, has not shown up yet.

“He has travelled to Vancouver, Winnipeg and Halifax, among other places, during the year. He could have found the time to come here,” she says.

### Public Meeting Schedule

	Date	Time	Location
<b>Nouvelle</b>	February 9	1:30 p.m.	3e LIEU, 183, route 132 East
<b>Carleton</b>	January 19	1:30 p.m.	Riotel (Baie Bleue) Honda room
<b>Maria</b>	February 16	1:30 p.m.	Pavillon communautaire, 65, rue Des Voltigeurs
<b>New Richmond</b>	February 23	10 a.m. to noon (English) 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. (French)	Notre-Dame-des-Saints-Anges church basement, 129, boul. Perron Ouest
<b>Bonaventure</b>	February 2	1:30 p.m.	Centre Bonne Aventure, 105, av. de Grand-Pré
<b>Paspebiac</b>	January 26	10 a.m. and noon (French) 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. (English)	Collectif Aliment-terre, 8A, boul. Gérard-D.-Lévesque



Since September 2013, Gaspésians have to either go to Matapedia (photo) or Campbellton in order to take the Ocean, the train linking Halifax to Montreal, and its return counterpart.