

MNAs affirm that railway refurbishment is delayed, not in jeopardy

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NEW RICHMOND – The Bonaventure and Gaspé Members of the National Assembly, Catherine Blouin, and Stéphane Sainte-Croix affirm that Quebec's Ministry of Transport is working to eventually issue more calls for tender for railway repairs east of Port Daniel to complete the refurbishment of the Gaspé Peninsula line to Gaspé.

When the Quebec budget was announced on March 25, the railway section between Port Daniel and Gaspé was downgraded to a "planning" status from the "realization" status it held for two years. This change was referenced in the Quebec Infrastructure Plan (PQI), triggering a lot of questions among regional stakeholders

Some were worried that the whole railroad upgrading project between Port Daniel and Gaspé could be axed, despite the fact that some work has been carried out on it since 2018. In fact, contracts worth close to \$200 million have been completed or are underway along that section of the network.

"We are not cancelling that refurbishment project. We are putting a knee on the ground in order to come back stronger. The project is sent to an evaluation status. The repair costs surpass considerably what had been budgeted. We are taking a step back in order to shed light on the reasons that explain such high costs," explains Catherine Blouin.

According to her, a possible way to save time and money for the continuation of track and bridge works could be to provide local contractors a chance, she says. "We are looking at fragmenting some calls for tenders in order to give local contractors a chance to submit bids. In some cases, it would go faster and cost less," stresses Catherine Blouin.

Quebec's Ministry of Transport took the opposite approach in 2023, amalgamating several bridge repair projects into one call for tenders, precisely in an attempt to save time and money.

In January, two calls for tenders were cancelled because the tenders were way higher than the bracket amounts suggested by Transports Québec. The cost overrun reached \$150 million in those cases.

Catherine Blouin acknowledges that returning to a planning stage will delay the resumption of traffic east of Port Daniel, but she adds that there is a bit of wiggle room.

"We have no confirmation of an upcoming railroad use between Port Daniel and Gaspé, notably from VIA Rail, as of now. It gives us time to rethink the project. The construction sites underway will be completed as soon as possible. Moreover, the Caplan to Port Daniel stretch will open in June," she states. She adds that they are thinking of making a committee to bring together the stakeholders and develop a plan. Reducing the speed and the weight of some cars circulating along the line are things that could be looked at according to her.



Photo: G. Gagné

Catherine Blouin and Stéphane Sainte-Croix assure that efforts are being made to return passenger and freight trains east of Port Daniel.

Stéphane Sainte-Croix is in agreement

Gaspé Member of the National Assembly (MNA) Stéphane Sainte-Croix also weighed in on the topic. "Over the past year, in terms of calls for tenders, we've had difficulty reconciling demand and supply. We've faced a significant cost explosion. We've made the decision to bring the section back into planning," he says.

Section three, the stretch between Port Daniel and Gaspé, had \$517 million budgeted since June 27, 2023. In total, 21 infrastructure projects must be repaired or rebuilt on that section, and the railway is expected to be relocated in two locations.

"There isn't a wide range of suppliers showing interest. This is a step back to reschedule section three and ensure our project is considered by suppliers," explains the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) MNA.

He suggests that the rail line may be recommissioned in 2027 or 2028. "There's already detailed planning for the work to be done. They're known and analyzed from a technical perspective and budgeted. We're going to redo our homework considering the budget targets we're unable to meet. The market is saturated for infrastructure in Quebec," analyzes Mr. Sainte-Croix.

However, he doesn't think the new delay will add to overall cost. "We are firmly com-

mitted to completing this project. We have prioritized and budgeted for it. We are facing market challenges. We will work in the coming months to find solutions and maintain the pace to deliver the Gaspé railway," he says.

"We must deliver it if we want to see the economy linked to it. We are convinced of the impact of rail on the development of our economy," adds Mr. Sainte-Croix.

"I'm not worried. We're already at work. We're in discussions with the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie. Everyone is hard at work. We delivered the first two sections as agreed. We encountered challenges for which we found solutions," Mr. Sainte-Croix recalls.