

Train will not go to Gaspé before the end of 2027

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GASPÉ- The Quebec Department of Transport is once again postponing the deadline to rehabilitate the reopening of the railroad to Gaspé, now targeting the fall of 2027.

In 2017, the provincial government promised to reach Gaspé in 2022. Then it was 2026, 2025, then 2026 again and now, all the regional stakeholders in the file estimate that the terminus of the line will not see its first train until the fall of 2027.

"It is a disappointment," says Gaspé Mayor Daniel Côté, who participated in a rail work monitoring committee with the authorities of the Quebec Ministry of Transport on January 22.

"We're being told about 2027 in the broad sense, but I would venture to assume that it's probably later than 2027," Daniel Côté continued.

For several weeks now, two major calls for tenders remain suspended by Transports Québec.

On January 22, the Ministry of Transport announced that it was cancelling these calls for tenders, citing significant differences with the estimated budget required.

The first call launched on March 21 faced nine postponements, and bids were only opened on September 18.

Pomerleau submitted a bid for \$258 million, while Partenariat Ferroviaire Gaspésie suggested \$286 million to complete the work.

The work involves repairing two bridges in Gascons, another between Gascons and Newport, one in Newport, and one in Douglastown. In addition, a bridge in Grande-Rivière was to be replaced, and a retaining wall in Pabos Mills is also part of the bid.

The contract duration was estimated at 28 months, according to the call for tenders.

Another revised contract,

which had originally provided for the repair or construction of nine infrastructure projects, but for which the price request was ultimately only for bridges, has also been dropped.

The targeted sites were a small bridge in Pabos Mills, the Grand Pabos River bridge, the Pabos River bridge, the Barachois bridge and the road bridge on Highway 132 in Barachois.

The Ministry of Transport had removed the four retaining walls at Anse-à-Beaufils and Sandy Beach from the project. The ministry indicated that the revised contract was estimated at over \$50 million.

On August 28, Pomerleau submitted the lowest proposal of \$79 million.

Hamel Construction, the only other bidder, was asking for \$83.8 million.

For the first contract, involving nine structures, only Pomerleau had submitted a bid of \$104 million.

"Consequently, the ministry will review its planning for awarding contracts with the aim of completing the entire project. As such, the design and the strategy for grouping the work will be reviewed with the aim of obtaining more competitive bids during the next calls for tenders," the ministry said in a January 22 press release. At the end of this review, it will be possible to present a new completion schedule for the remaining work between Port-Daniel-Gascons and Gaspé.

"Everything is being done to complete all the work up to Gaspé as quickly as possible," the ministry added.

"This is the process we got bogged down in. The time it takes to get out of the process is time we're not spending doing work. That largely explains why the work is delayed and why we're disappointed," says Mayor Côté.

The total of the tenders could now surpass \$517 million, the sum budgeted by

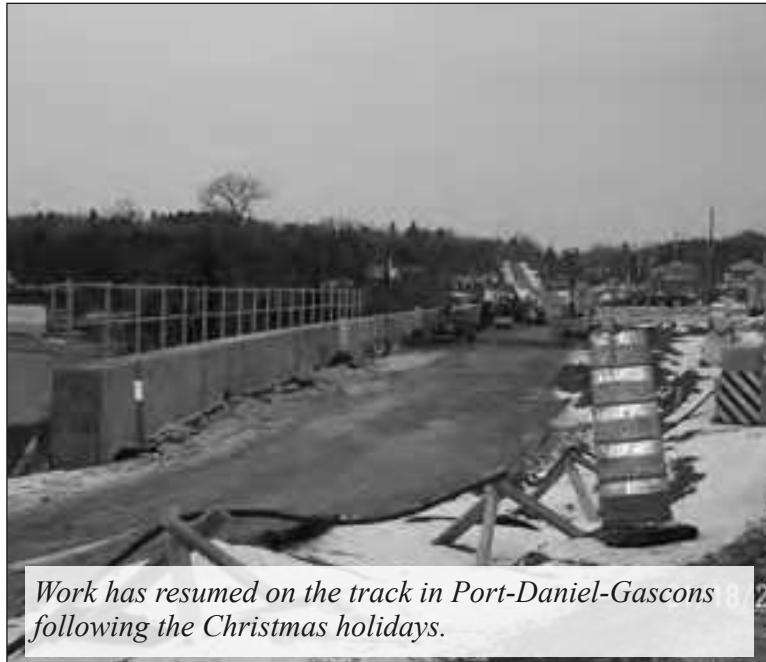


Photo: Courtesy Anthony Bernard Prince

Transports Québec for the Port Daniel-Gaspé stretch of railroad. Some contracts have already been awarded on that section.

Not a surprise

"It (another delay) is not really a surprise. We've seen it coming for a while, knowing that barely 50% of the contracts were awarded on the third section and that there were calls for tender rejected. It was inevitable," comments the president of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, Éric Dubé. "To meet the 2026 deadline, all the work would have had to be given in 2024," adds Mr. Dubé.

"The calls for tenders compared to the estimates have exploded. When they are not able to explain the discrepancies and with the leeway they can afford, they have to find solutions to return to calls for tenders," he continues.

"What will be important is for the ministry to come out with calls for tenders as soon as possible so as not to lose another year," says Mr. Dubé.

The ministry mentioned this coming spring. "The definition of spring is not a specific date. Will it be April? May? We want it as soon as possible to have an answer as quickly as possible. We will just know when the calls for tenders open if there will be other delays. We have just lost 2024," says President Dubé.

In an ideal world, bids should be called in February so as not to lose 2025. "They are working very hard to go to calls for tenders so as not to lose another year," continued Mr. Dubé.

The Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie could be asked to do more work to give a boost to the rehabilitation.

"We think we can minimize costs. The ministry came to us

with an additional bridge in Caplan since the section will not be open before June. It's a big project and we will be able to deliver. That's the role we can play to help," says Mr. Dubé.

The superstructures will not be able to be built by the company, but the culverts and level crossings could be taken care of.

One billion dollars?

Will a budget of \$1 billion be needed to complete the entire refurbishment?

"We asked ourselves whether additional funds will be needed. As long as that is not known, it will be difficult to ask for more until we have spent all the money we have. The ministry is working on the objective of carrying out the necessary work. Until all calls for tenders are open, it's difficult to speculate. We're not there yet," Mr. Dubé analyzes. The work will continue in 2025 on six sites between Port-Daniel-Gascons and Gaspé.

The interventions include the reconstruction of seven structures (five bridges and two walls), the rehabilitation of 18 structures, the relocation of track in three sectors, the replacement of more than 120 culverts, protection work against coastal erosion and submersion and interventions on the components of the railway for the entire section, with changes of ties as well as ballasting and levelling work.

Section two between Caplan and Port-Daniel-Gascons should be put into service this spring.

Can we believe in 2027 for Gaspé? "It will depend on how quickly the ministry awards contracts for the third section by summer. Otherwise, we will lose another year," says Mr. Dubé.

"We have political assurances that the file will be settled and that the last section to Gaspé will not be abandoned even if there were delays and additional costs," says Daniel Côté.

Economic development

The postponement of another year to reach Gaspé will have impacts on the economic development of the Rocher-Percé and Côte-de-Gaspé MRCs.

The ministry asked the company to find out if this announcement will have financial impacts on it. "Everything east of the cement plant, we have not yet quantified the impacts since we are one year behind. We will have to do the exercise. We will have to talk with the companies and the economic departments of the MRCs concerned to see what they had in their book," says Mr. Dubé.

It will have no impact on the Mines Gaspé revival project in Murdochville since exploitation is planned for around 2030.

The picture could be different for LM Wind Power in Gaspé, which now manufactures smaller blades, the size of the blades that were previously transported by truck to New Richmond to be placed on a train.

"This is an issue that we will have to quantify. Knowing that we would be in Port-Daniel in 2025, rather than bringing them to New Richmond, we have to see if we can transship them closer to the manufacturing point. It's a bit like when we started transshipping them in New Richmond: we were supposed to do it for two years. We did it for six years," says Mr. Dubé.

"It's a thorn in the side," says Daniel Côté when asked about the credibility of the rehabilitation schedule that has been postponed again.

"It always sounds a bit strange for companies for whom deadlines are important. We don't necessarily have a million companies running after us. We can't guarantee 2026-2027." We have to postpone it to 2027. It has an impact on our credibility in our town and our region. There are elements over which we have no control other than to exert pressure. We continue to exert pressure, but there are things that are beyond our control, but it is certain that it has an impact on our credibility," adds the mayor of Gaspé.



The president of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, Éric Dubé.

Photo: N. Sergerie