

# The Gaspé **SPEC**



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Photo: G. Gagné

Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard, right, flanked here by regional minister, Sébastien Proulx, remained vague about the return of a passenger train to the Gaspé Peninsula, suggesting that his level of government is not in charge of VIA Rail.

## Quebec government earmarks \$100 million for the railway

Gilles Gagné

NEW CARLISLE: – Quebec’s Premier, Philippe Couillard, announced on May 5 that the Matapédia to Gaspé line will be upgraded over the next years at a cost he judges to be at least \$100 million. However, he was not in a position to determine a time frame for the realization of the work, because some studies remain to be completed.

Mr. Couillard also indicated that the reflection of the railway is now registered in Quebec’s major infrastructure projects, 2017-2027, along with the Turcot Interchange and the province’s large hospitals in order to secure its funding.

“I can say that it is \$100 million, not \$100 million that others will be able to take some parts away from (...) I don’t believe we will be able to get to Gaspé with \$100 million,” added Mr. Couillard.

He justified the decision to repair the line all the way to Gaspé by the economic strength of the file.

“We have evidence of new economic activity in the Gaspé Peninsula,” he said before looking at Alexandre Boulay, the director general of the LM Windpower Plant in Gaspé, and adding that “people were impressed to see the company’s publicity during the Christmas break saying that there are jobs available in the Gaspé Peninsula.”

The Matapédia-Gaspé railway was acquired by Quebec’s Department of Transport

two years ago. It was announced in March 2015 and it was concluded on May 15th of the same year. It was known back then that the line, mainly its bridges, needed repairs. Instead of opting for the repairs, the ministry decided that almost two-thirds of the line be put in a dormant state, from Caplan to Gaspé.

Since the summer of 2016 though, the transport requests, stemming from that dormant section, have been numerous, thus forcing the Gaspésie Railway Society, the operator of the line, to accommodate two clients, windmill blade manufacturer LM Windpower and McInnis Cement, to organize temporary solutions because they cannot load their production at or near their plants of Gaspé and Port Daniel, respectively.

LM must haul its blades by truck between Gaspé and New Richmond, and transfer them into railcars for the final delivery to the United States. McInnis Cement will do the same with a part of its output as soon as the Port Daniel plant will begin its production.

The freight traffic between Caplan and Matapédia climbed from 1,624 to 1,741 carloads between 2015 and 2016, and will reach at least 3,000 carloads in 2017. Transport requests from potential customers could propel that number to 10,000 carloads in 2020 if the railway service is brought back to Gaspé.

The time it will take to upgrade the whole line and resume operations still represent

the biggest unknown, despite the reassuring tone Premier Couillard adopted during the announcement.

He explained that the line is divided in three sections, Matapédia-Caplan, Caplan-Port Daniel and Port Daniel-Gaspé, and each section is characterized by a specific status.

Hence, the Matapédia-Caplan section is a “business case” the last step before final upgrading work is carried out.

The Caplan-Port Daniel stretch is classified as an “opportunity file deserving quick and priority realization” while the Port Daniel-Gaspé is “put under study regarding its (business) opportunities.”

Philippe Couillard insisted, just like Transports Québec civil servants had done prior to him, that 28 structures of three metres and more, located along the Gaspé Peninsula line, require “essential work.” Sixteen of those structures are located between Port Daniel and Gaspé.

The premier was asked by SPEC if realization delays could lead potential shippers to opt for other transportation modes, thus ruling out the railway and making the Port Daniel-Gaspé stretch stuck with a “case under study status” instead of becoming a “business case”.

“It won’t happen because we will be able to provide a foreseeable time frame to investors (or plant operators),” replied the premier.

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The management of LM Windpower has repeatedly said over the last months that rail service is needed in Gaspé as soon as possible and before the next three years.

Asked if a return to Gaspé is possible in 2020 or before, Josée Hallée, who manages the railway division of Transports Québec, replied that east of Port Daniel, “the stakes are major.” She meant that it will be very difficult. She made that statement during a debriefing period reserved for the regional media, 90 minutes before the announcement made by Premier Couillard.

However, Marie Deschamps, the press secretary of regional minister Sébastien Proulx, replied to the same question, while sitting alongside Ms. Hallée, that “it doesn’t mean that we can’t” (reach Gaspé in less than three years).

Premier Couillard remained vague about the possible return of a passenger train in the Gaspé Peninsula and when it would happen. He justified his vague answer by pointing out that “it takes an operator”, without mentioning Via Rail, a corporation owned by the federal government, over which he has no control.

“It is up to the operators to raise their hand. It (the return of the passenger train) will not add major works”, he specified.