

RETURNING THE VIA RAIL TRAIN TO NEW CARLISLE IN 2023

VIA train #16 at New Carlisle station, January 31, 2011

Photo: David Morris, Fredericton, New Brunswick



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	Introduction	5
2.	History	5
	2.1. Suspension of VIA Rail service between New Carlisle and Gaspé	5
	2.2. Suspension of VIA Rail service between Matapédia and New Carlisle	5
	2.3. Transfer of ownership to the <i>Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie</i> (SCFG)	6
	2.4. Commitment by VIA Rail	6
3.	Justification for the return of passenger trains to the Gaspésie	7
	3.1. Ridership	7
	3.2. Education.....	7
	3.3. Healthcare	7
	3.4. Tourism.....	7
	3.5. Mobility and Employment	8
	3.6. The Environment	8
4.	The return of the train as far as New Carlisle by the end of 2023	9
5.	Renewal of the Gaspésie railway	10
6.	Importance of the passenger train for Gaspésians	12
7.	Appendix	15

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Coalition des Gaspésiens pour le retour du train de passager de VIA Rail* (Coalition of Gaspésians for the return of the VIA Rail passenger train), a non-profit organization, has set itself the mission of restoring passenger rail transportation service in the Gaspésie. This service was partially discontinued in 2011, and completely in 2013, due to poor condition of the railway track and bridges. This lack of passenger rail transport causes severe and numerous difficulties for the population of the region and beyond.

Major infrastructure work completed and currently underway will make operating passenger trains between Matapédia and New Carlisle safe once again in the not-too-distant future; depending on the progress of the work, we can expect to have a restored railway before the end of 2023. The Coalition therefore believes that it is appropriate for the political, economic and social advocates and representatives of the Gaspésie to unite and promptly ask VIA Rail to plan the resumption of service on this section.

In this document, we present a status report and the reasons for the return of passenger train service; above all, we argue that it is not only possible, but necessary for passenger service to be restored between Matapédia and New Carlisle as soon as the infrastructure is ready to accommodate VIA Rail trains.

2. HISTORY

2.1. Suspension of VIA Rail service between New Carlisle and Gaspé

On December 10, 2011, VIA Rail withdrew trains #16 and #17 between New Carlisle and Gaspé, citing the poor condition of the Grand-Pabos railway bridge. However, rail service was maintained between Matapédia and New Carlisle.

In order to continue to provide passenger service between New Carlisle and Gaspé, VIA Rail provided a bus service between New Carlisle and Gaspé at its own expense, operated by *Autobus Couture et Cahill* at a price of \$1,100 per day per bus.

Autobus Couture et Cahill had previously fulfilled various contracts to complement and replace rail services over a period of 25 to 30 years.

2.2. Suspension of VIA Rail service between Matapédia and New Carlisle

On August 13, 2013, VIA Rail withdrew the train between New Carlisle and Matapédia, citing problems related to the rail infrastructure of the *Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie* (SCFG). The interruption of passenger rail service hit the people of Gaspé and those who wanted to travel to the region hard.

The people of Gaspé have never stopped calling for the return of the train. In 2015, 3,050 people signed a petition and 1,200 returned postcards to request the return of the VIA Rail train service. At the same time, several municipalities, community organizations and businesses made their support publicly known, not to mention a large number of citizens who individually left favourable comments on the website of the *Coalition des Gaspésiens pour le retour du train*.

In September 2016, more than 5,174 people signed another petition presented to the Quebec National Assembly to request the reopening of the Matapédia to New Carlisle section of the railway; and several municipalities and community organizations publicly supported this approach. Finally, in 2017, 2,668 people sent a letter to the Prime Minister of Canada making the same request.

2.3. Transfer of ownership to the *Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie (SCFG)*

On November 21, 2014, the SCFG, owner of the railway, filed for protection under the Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act.

On May 15, 2015, the *Ministère des Transports du Québec* (MTQ) purchased the railway right-of-way from the SCFG. The MTQ now owns the railway line between Matapédia and Gaspé, a distance of 322 kilometres. In December 2016, all elected officials in Gaspésie asked the Quebec government to reopen the railway to Gaspé, and on May 5, 2017 the MTQ allocated \$100 million for the renewal of the railway.

In addition, in February 2020, Marie-Ève Proulx, Minister responsible for the Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine region and Minister for Regional Economic Development, made an announcement in Gaspé of an additional \$135 million in funding on behalf of the Minister of Transport. To date, the Government of Quebec has made \$235 million available for the renewal of the railway.

Analysis work is already underway regarding the renewal of the Port-Daniel-Gascons to Gaspé section. The *Ministère des Transports et de la Mobilité durable* (MTMD) preliminarily estimates this will cost between \$248 million and \$355 million. As of January 25, 2023, the MTMD has spent or committed \$165.1 million for work already completed or in progress.

The MTMD has also allocated \$45.8 million in grants received from the Government of Canada to carry out work in areas affected by coastal erosion.

Major work has already been completed on the Matapédia/New Carlisle section. The reconstruction of the Ruisseau-Leblanc bridge in Saint-Siméon/Caplan and the repairs to the Bonaventure River bridge remain to be completed; and these bridges will likely be delivered by August 2023. In 2023, the MTMD intends to proceed with repairs to a culvert in Caplan and a small bridge in Saint-Siméon. Once this work is completed, VIA Rail will be able to safely use the portion of the railway between Matapédia and New Carlisle.

Some work on the railway line also began in September 2020 on the section between Port-Daniel-Gascons and Gaspé. Another encouraging sign is that twelve contractors have already responded to a call for interest in carrying out railway renewal work on this section, launched by the MTMD on November 11, 2022.¹

2.4. Commitment by VIA Rail

Over the past five years, at its annual public meetings, VIA Rail has reiterated its commitment to resume service when the railway is restored all the way to Gaspé.²

¹ Call for interest for the railway line between Port-Daniel-Gascons and Gaspé
www.newswire.ca/fr/news-releases/rehabilitation-du-chemin-de-fer-de-la-gaspesie-appel-d-interet-pour-le-troncon-ferroviaire-entre-port-daniel-gascons-et-gaspe-859384235.html

² VIA Rail Annual Public Meeting 2022, Questions and Answers, Q8
https://corpo.viarail.ca/sites/default/files/media/pdf/speeches/2022.08.09_2022%20APM_QA.pdf

3. JUSTIFICATION FOR THE RETURN OF PASSENGER TRAINS TO THE GASPÉSIE

There are many reasons for returning passenger rail service to the Gaspésie as soon as possible. A partial return, between Matapédia and New Carlisle, is also possible in the foreseeable future since we have a good idea of the schedule for the work that needs to be completed to renew the infrastructure on this section of the line.

3.1. Ridership

The people of the Gaspésie have always used their passenger train. The ridership statistics prove it. Between 2004 and 2013, the Montréal-Gaspé train carried more passengers than the two other regional trains in Québec combined. In 2011, 27,991 passengers took the Montréal-Gaspé train, while the Montréal-Jonquière and Montréal-Senneterre trains, combined, carried 25,870 passengers (see the complete table in the Appendix).

The train is also a popular mode of transport for passengers. It represents the ideal way of travelling over long distances due to its comfort, the possibility of working, and the availability of sleeping cars; it should be noted that 1,047 km separate Gaspé and Montreal by rail, an eighteen-hour journey.³ The train is more economical than the plane and better suited to certain customers than the car (the elderly or young, for example).

The train in the Gaspésie has the additional advantage of connecting passengers directly to the Canadian rail network, connecting the Gaspésie with the major centres of Quebec City, Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto.

3.2. Education

Many young Gaspésians must travel outside the region to continue their studies. The train is the best way for them to get there. In addition, educational institutions, such as the *Cégep de la Gaspésie et des Îles*, welcome students from outside the region attracted by unique programs offered exclusively by these institutions.

Furthermore, professors and leading academics travel by train to meetings or conventions outside the region.

3.3. Healthcare

The population of the Gaspésie is aging, and many people must travel long distances to receive ongoing specialized healthcare. Think, for example, of patients suffering from cancer and heart problems who have to travel regularly to Montreal, Quebec City, or Rimouski for treatment. The train provides them with a safe and comfortable mode of transportation, especially in winter.

3.4. Tourism

The Gaspésie is one of Quebec's main tourist attractions. Many visitors like to come to the Gaspésie by train, not to mention people who come to visit friends or family. Many Gaspésians also need the train to travel out of the region to meet family or friends elsewhere in Canada.

The withdrawal of VIA Rail service unfortunately resulted in the abandonment of an original tourism product. For 10 years, from 1998 to 2008, the VIA Rail Montréal – Gaspé train transported 2,400 tourists annually, who used the services of *Tauck Tours* and *Maupin Tours* to book travel by

³ VIA Rail Timetable, January 24, 2012, page 32: Gaspé – Montréal.
<https://www.gaspetrain.org/gt-pdfs/timetable20120124.pdf>

sleeping car from Montréal to Percé and accommodation at the *Normandie* and *Pic de l'Aurore* hotels. This clientele spent money in the region's hotels, restaurants and shops, made excursions, etc.

Each tourist spent about \$500 each day, so economic benefits of more than \$1,200,000 per year are calculated over this period (\$12,000,000 over ten years). Without the comfort of the train, these tourists would not have come to the Gaspésie. These visitors created benefits throughout the region since they often returned to Montreal by bus, visiting Chaleur Bay, Percé, Gaspé, Forillon National Park, and the entire north coast of the peninsula.

The sleeping car fares also brought substantial revenues to VIA Rail. Nothing would prevent the resumption of a similar or comparable service to and from New Carlisle.

3.5. Mobility and Employment

The train is an essential tool to promote mobility and recruitment of labour, both within the region and in connection with the rest of Canada.

People in all industries who need to travel for business find in this method a comfortable and affordable way to get around. The mobility of people is a vital factor in regional development. In addition, when the passenger train is operating between Matapédia and Gaspé, that itself creates jobs in the stations, on board the train, and in the maintenance of the railway. These positions have been laid off since 2013.

In this regard, it is pertinent to note that the Gaspésie is attracting new citizens. According to the *Institut de la statistique du Québec* (ISQ), positive net interregional migration was 1,378 in 2020/2021 and 742 in 2021/2022. The total population of the Gaspésie was 92,403 in 2022.⁴⁵⁶

These newcomers, including young Gaspésians who are returning after their studies, energize the region and ensure its future. Considering that many newcomers are also settling in the Gaspésie and that they will need to travel for family, professional or leisure reasons, the passenger train would offer them an ecological and safe way to travel.

3.6. The Environment

Climate change and global warming are two of the major problems affecting our society. According to scientists (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – IPCC), there is an urgent need to reduce greenhouse gases (GHGs). Rail is an effective way to take vehicles off our roads and lower our GHG emissions. Public authorities must encourage the shift from individual vehicles to public transport. For example, the option of the train for long distance travel must be available, affordable and attractive to those who now drive.

The train is also the means of transport best suited to flexibility in customer numbers. Indeed, when the number of passengers varies, it is enough to add or remove cars from the train according to demand.

4 Institut de la statistique du Québec – In-migrants, out-migrants, net interregional migration
https://statistique.quebec.ca/en/document/internal-migrations-administrative-regions/tableau/in-migrants-out-migrants-net-interregional-migration-and-corresponding-rates-by-age-group-administrative-regions-and-all-of-quebec#tri_annee=42127&tri_tertr=0&tri_age=1

5 Institut de la statistique du Québec - Population estimates for administrative regions, Québec, July 1, 1986 to 2022

<https://statistique.quebec.ca/en/document/population-and-age-and-sex-structure-administrative-regions/tableau/estimations-population-regions-administratives>

6 Vivre en Gaspésie – Actualités – Solde migratoire 2021-2022 positif

<https://vivreengaspesie.com/2023/01/12/solde-migratoire-2021-2022-positif-la-gaspesie-iles-de-la-madeleine-continue-de-se-demarquer/>

4. THE RETURN OF THE TRAIN AS FAR AS NEW CARLISLE BY THE END OF 2023

VIA Rail cited the poor condition of the bridges and the railway line in general between Matapédia and Gaspé to suspend, in two stages, all service in Gaspésie, in 2011 and 2013. The Government of Quebec has carried out considerable work on the railway to ensure its safety and make it perfectly passable, particularly for VIA Rail trains. The work will be completed between Matapédia and New Carlisle by the end of 2023.

Gaspésians and their visitors have been deprived of passenger rail service for almost ten years. The whole region suffers, socially, economically and environmentally. Any unnecessary extension of the absence of the train, while waiting, for example, for renewal to the end of the track in Gaspé, can only compromise citizens' confidence in this public service, and constitutes a renunciation of VIA Rail's fundamental mission. Indeed, VIA Rail is mandated to provide rail service in Canada, and is largely funded for this purpose by the federal government. In 2020, for example, federal funding for VIA Rail was \$668.7 million, including \$415.8 million for operations alone. In 2021, the company received \$596.9 million.⁷

VIA Rail's service disruption also resulted in a direct loss to the SCFG (\$619,000 in 2014), because it was no longer paying for its running rights on the tracks. This shortfall is reflected throughout the regional economy.

Any further delay in the resumption of service between Montreal and the Gaspésie will hinder the rebuilding of the habit of travelling by train. The longer we wait, the more difficult it will be to convince travellers to take the VIA Rail train and consider it a reliable means of transportation.

It is therefore urgent to resume service as soon as possible, even on a partial route.

There is no serious reason for VIA Rail to delay the resumption of service between Matapédia and New Carlisle after the infrastructure renewal work has been completed; the conditions formulated by VIA Rail will then be met, namely the safety of the track and an acceptable travel speed.

The suspension of VIA Rail's service, in part, then totally, in the Gaspésie has saved the federal government and the Crown corporation \$40 million, an amount that should be reinvested for the benefit of Gaspésie residents. When providing the service, VIA Rail had operating costs of \$6 million annually, and revenues of at least \$2 million, for a net cost of \$4 million.

It should also be noted that the railway infrastructure at New Carlisle includes a turning triangle (wye) that allows the train to be turned.

Once the work is completed, there will be no technical obstacle to placing the temporary terminus at New Carlisle, pending the return of the train to Gaspé. Indeed, between 2011 and 2013, the train stopped in New Carlisle and passengers were conveyed to Gaspé by bus. This service could be quickly reinstated. Currently, the RÉGÎM offers a rail shuttle service between Gaspé and Campbellton during peak periods and the winter holidays.⁸

VIA Rail should immediately start planning for the restoration of service on the Matapédia to New Carlisle section.

Therefore we call on the federal government and VIA Rail to reinstate train service on the Matapédia to New Carlisle section as soon as the infrastructure work is completed.

⁷ VIA Rail Canada, Annual Report 2021, The Year at a Glance, p. 13

https://media.viarail.ca/sites/default/files/publications/Annual_report_2021_EN.pdf

⁸ RÉGÎM: Régie intermunicipale de transport Gaspésie – Îles-de-la-Madeleine - <https://regim.info/>

RENEWAL OF THE GASPÉSIE RAILWAY

Work carried out on railway bridges

As of January 25, 2023, the MTMD has spent or committed \$165.1 million for work already completed or in progress.

Source: MTMD



The photos on this page depict repair work on the railway in the Bonaventure area. These photos were taken between Bourdages Road (Mile 91.88, Cascapédia Subdivision) and Henry Road (Mile 90.78) on Friday, October 26, 2018.

The work had just begun on Saturday, October 13, 2018.

The work progressed from east to west.

- The team worked for 10 consecutive days.
- 10,000 ties were replaced, another 10,000 were changed in spring 2019.
- Friday, October 26 was a productive day: I was told that 1,500 ties were replaced.
- Work ended on Monday, October 29 and resumed in spring 2019.

The work was carried out by Rail Cantech Inc. - <https://www.railcantech.com/en> at a cost of \$2,095,200 (réf: 3301-18-0005)

Photos: Bernard Babin





Railway bridge in Caplan: *Camping Ruisselet* – Mile 80.90

Hamel Construction was awarded the contract for the railway bridge at *Camping Ruisselet* in Caplan. The contract was valued at \$6 million. Work began in September 2020 and was completed in May 2021. In the photo on the left, we see the old wooden bridge.

Photos: Anthony Bernard Prince

Bonaventure River railway bridge – Mile 90.10

Bonaventure River railway bridge is at Mile 90.10 of the Cascapédia Subdivision. The contract for the repair of this railway bridge was awarded to *Groupe SÉMA structures ferroviaires*. The contract is valued at \$6.5 million. Work began in September 2022 and is progressing well. The work is expected to be completed by summer 2023. In the photo opposite, we see the work currently underway on this bridge.

Photo: Allen Douglas Shaw



Ruisseau-Leblanc railway bridge in Caplan – Mile 82.20

The Ruisseau-Leblanc railway bridge is at Mile 82.20 of the Cascapédia Subdivision. The contract to replace this iron bridge was awarded to *Construction Polaris CMM Inc*. The contract is valued at \$7.9 million. Work began in July 2022 and is progressing well. The work is expected to be completed by summer 2023. In the photo on the right, we see the work currently underway as of December 27, 2022.

Photos: Allen Douglas Shaw



IMPORTANCE OF THE PASSENGER TRAIN FOR GASPESIANS



Chandler Station

Photo: Dominique Léger Collection

New Carlisle Station

New Carlisle's second station, built in 1947, is recognized as a heritage station by the Government of Canada. It is located half way between Matapédia and Gaspé, and the station master always warmly welcomes many travelers and aims to satisfy their needs.

Photo: Dominique Léger Collection





Gaspé demonstration

Significant demonstration on January 28, 2006 at the Gaspé train station, with the public demanding the maintenance of rail services in the Gaspésie.

Photo: Michel Tremblay, Gaspé (Québec)

Two passenger trains at Matapédia station

Matapédia Station (Quebec) on February 17, 2011. It is here that the two passenger trains arriving from Montreal separate. Passenger cars for the Gaspésie (from Matapédia to Gaspé) are handled by separate locomotives. The Gaspésie train, commonly known as the *Chaleur*, is the train pictured on the left in the photo.



Photo : Private collection



VIA Rail passenger train #616, steadfastly continuing its journey on December 23, 2004 towards Gaspé.

In this photo, we can clearly see the consist of two locomotives and 11 cars, including sleeping cars and the prestigious Park panoramic dome car at the end of the train for the comfort of passengers.

This photo clearly shows the ridership and use of VIA Rail's passenger train service in the Gaspésie.

Photo: Michel Tremblay, Gaspé (Québec)

APPENDIX

Comparative table of passengers on VIA Rail regional trains running in Québec

	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	2009	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004
MONTRÉAL-GASPÉ											
<i>Passengers per year</i>	-	15,907	18,630	27,991	27,365	27,031	29,593	24,894	26,108	27,183	25,954
Total over 10 years	250,656										
Average number of passengers for each train to the Gaspésie	160										
MONTRÉAL-JONQUIÈRE											
<i>Passengers per year</i>	10,933	12,179	13,542	13,750	13,629	15,194	16,663	15,862	16,524	17,239	17,623
Total over 10 years	152,205										
Average number of passengers for each train	97										
MONTRÉAL-SENNETERRE											
<i>Passengers per year</i>	10,792	11,078	12,199	12,120	12,196	14,386	15,218	14,794	18,122	16,916	16,386
Total over 10 years	143,415										
Average number of passengers for each train	91										
Total for the Jonquièrre and Senneterre trains only				25,870	25,825						

Source : VIA Rail Official Statistics

Observations :

- For the years 2010 and 2011, the Montréal–Gaspé train alone carried 55,356 passengers compared to 51,695 for the other two trains combined, namely the Montréal-Jonquièrre train and the Montréal-Senneterre train.
- For the years 2008 to 2011 inclusive, the Montréal–Gaspé train transported an average of 190 people for each trip of the train to Gaspésie and its return, the equivalent of 4 passenger buses.
- **Anecdotal data:** if we calculate an average of \$300 spent for each passenger taking the train, fares of \$75,196,800 are generated in revenues at Via Rail; if each traveler spends \$500 during each visit to the Gaspésie, that's \$128,328,000 invested in the region's economy.

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Source: VIA Rail Official Statistics



VIA Rail passenger train #16 approaching Percé station on January 28, 2006, photo taken in the Brèche-à-Manon area (Sainte-Thérèse-de-Gaspé).

Photo: Michel Tremblay (Gaspé)

VIA Rail passenger train at Gaspé station, February 18, 2009, waiting for its next departure to Montreal.

Photo: Gilles Fortier (Gaspé)

