

Gaspésie Railway Society still waiting for news from Transport Québec

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: – The Gaspésie Railway Society is still waiting for news from Quebec's Transport ministry regarding a grant that is necessary to upgrade the bearing capacity of several bridges located between Matapédia and Gaspé.

Éric Dubé, president of the Gaspésie Railway Society, met with Transport minister Robert Poéti on August 6 in order to give him the details of a \$35 million request for a grant.

Even though it has been known for a year that the money allotted for rail improvements in the Gaspé Peninsula was going to be gone by June 2014, the Quebec government remains silent. Éric Dubé is not blaming Transport Québec yet.

"Let's face it, they will not sign a blank cheque," he stresses regarding the civil servants assessing the file. "We also had to re-establish something, confidence-wise."

Confidence in the Gaspésie Railway Society was affected by the use of a saline solution as herbicide, in the summer of 2013. That saline solution caused damage to some electrical devices on a number of level crossings located between Matapédia and New Carlisle. The devices were repaired by the end of September.

VIA Rail, then one of the two main sources of revenue for the Gaspésie Railway Society, decided to suspend its operations east of Matapédia, and the suspension is still in effect a year later.

At the end of this spring, the Gaspésie Railway Society decided to submit a \$33 million plan, later adjusted to \$35 million, supposed to span two years. That step was part of a



Photo: G. Gagné

People might never see long trains like this one (five locomotives and 71 cars) along the Gaspé line but Gaspésie Railway Society president Éric Dubé maintains that the railway is essential to the regional economy.

five-year \$105 million plan required to upgrade the Matapédia-Gaspé line for the next 25 years.

At the present time, Éric Dubé is not even talking about the \$35 million for two years. He is talking about a \$35 million plan without a deadline.

"We prefer talking about a step-by-step approach. The \$35 million are meant to bring back the passenger service to New Carlisle, to assure that a capacity of 263,000 pounds (per freight car) is offered as far as Port Daniel, and a capacity of 225,000 pounds down to Gaspé, in order to make sure that the tourist train and wind mill blades can pass," explains Mr. Dubé.

A capacity of 263,000 pounds per freight car used to be the standard between Matapédia and Gaspé. The average weight of a car is around 60,000 pounds, which allows the load to reach about 200,000 pounds, three times

what a truck trailer can take. Today's main rail lines allow for a capacity of 286,000 pounds per freight car.

Is the Quebec government, which has announced running an overall cost-cutting plan, trying to save money in the current year's budget through not investing in the Gaspesian line? "It is not up to me to answer that. It is a new government. Their people (civil servants) revise our history and our file across the board. They were quite positive about the points we raised. They know that our situation is urgent," adds Éric Dubé.

The Gaspésie Railway services the Temrex sawmill in Nouvelle five times a week. The sawmill loads between 1,500 and 2,000 cars annually.

Éric Dubé admitted in June that the Gaspésie Railway Society would have a hard time paying for repairs costing tens of thousands of dollars, if that were to be the case.