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*Philip Toone, right, as well as Bernard Babin and Gilles Lamy, are encouraged by the meeting they had with Quebec Transport Minister Robert Poëti.*

## Coalition meets with Transport Minister Robert Poëti

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: – Three members of the Coalition of Gaspésians for the future of the train, a group wanting to bring back VIA Rail's passenger train between Matapédia and Gaspé, is "optimistic" after meeting with Quebec's Transport Minister Robert Poëti on June 30 in Quebec City.

In its first phase, the project consists of convincing VIA Rail to use a tandem of Budd automotive cars, which are much lighter than the locomotives pulling conventional trains. While the minister didn't commit to anything right away, he said that he will make verifications.

"We are very encouraged. Minister Poëti wants to make verifications. The fact that he wants to make them is a good sign," said Philip Toone, Member of Parliament for the Gaspésie-Magdalen Islands riding. Toone, Gilles Lamy and Bernard Babin decided that Mr. Toone would continue to negotiate with Minister Poëti in the short term.

Although VIA Rail is owned by the federal government, Transport-Québec now owns the Matapédia-Gaspé line and must be consulted on any significant move pertaining to the regional railway.

Gilles Lamy, Bernard Babin and Philip Toone asked Transport-Québec to pay for a study that would provide the last update of the line's numerous bridges' bearing capacity.

"The cost of the study is minimal. I don't think it will be the difficult part of the file.

The real question is: what will we do with the results of the study? Minister Poëti asked how much it will cost to conduct the study. He said that the ministry is already carrying out its own studies on the line portions that are not dormant, namely the Matapédia-Caplan and the Gaspé to Percé stretches," said Mr. Toone.

When Transport-Québec announced that it would buy the Matapédia to Gaspé line at the beginning of March, Robert Poëti pointed out that the Caplan to Percé stretch would be put in a dormant state while waiting for rail traffic business opportunities.

"Considering that Transport-Québec is already conducting studies on the active portions of the line, we are just asking to extend the assessment to the parts that are dormant," said Philip Toone.

"I would say that the idea of a low cost, temporary solution was well received," he said.

Between Matapédia and Gaspé, the rail bed is generally considered in good shape. The main problem lies with some of the long bridges located along the line. Some of them require thorough repairs, and at least two, the ones spanning the Grand Cascape-dia River, must be replaced.

The most recent study revealed that \$107 million would be needed to upgrade the line and make it safe for the next quarter of a century, maybe more. Most of the required work consists of fixing bridges.

Over the long term, the Coalition expects to request the use of a conventional train

from VIA Rail and from Transport-Québec. Increasing the bearing capacity of the bridges will be needed to generate train traffic east of Caplan anyway.

A Budd car weighs 54 tonnes while a standard VIA Rail locomotive weighs 130 tonnes.

Philip Toone points out that the federal government has not allotted one cent to the Gaspé Peninsula line since 2011.

"The federal (budgetary) part remains to be negotiated. I insist on a point; the federal government can contribute to railway infrastructures owned by another body. The way it will be done remains to be determined," says the Member of Parliament.

A few years ago, the federal government injected \$950 million on the line between Montreal and Toronto for the purpose of improving VIA Rail's service.

Earlier this year, Mr. Toone submitted a bill to the House of Commons, bill C-640, calling for the improvement of VIA Rail services across the country. The bill would also have made compulsory a round of public hearings before any service suppression. The bill was rejected by the Conservative Party MPs, but accepted by all the opposition parties.

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