

File regarding the passenger train will move forward with a study

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: – The Matapedia to Gaspé passenger train file could soon move forward, as Quebec's department of Economy, Innovation and Exports is supposed to allot the money necessary to assess the bearing capacity of the bridges between Matapedia and Gaspé.

The money will be given to the Gaspésie Railway Society, the current operator of the freight train and the former owner of the line between Matapedia and Gaspé. Since the spring that railway has been owned by Quebec's department of Transport, which took over in order to erase a \$3.9 million debt.

The Gaspésie Railway Society will use the money for the study to hire a consultant charged to update previous studies carried out about the bearing capacity of the line. The amount has not yet been revealed says Éric Dubé, president of the Gaspésie Railway Society. Last spring, the sum of \$40,000 was mentioned.

"The study will be done with prime consideration for the use of a light passenger train owned by VIA Rail. It will assess the possibility of using Budd cars over the whole length of the line, from Matapedia to Gaspé," says Mr. Dubé.

The study should evaluate the cost of repairing certain bridges, the main hurdle hampering the return of VIA Rail's passenger train west of the Cascapedia river.

In June, a group formed by Gaspesian citizens held a well-attended public meeting in Chandler to present its project for passenger train service resumption, based on the use of Budd automotive cars in a first phase.

The eventual return of a conventional train all the way

to Gaspé is the long term goal of the group led by Paspebiac's Gilles Lamy, a former CN and VIA Rail employee, Bernard Babin, a Gaspesian living in Lévis and Anthony Bernard Prince, a Port Daniel citizen.

Gilles Lamy thinks that all the bridges between Matapedia and Gaspé can probably support Budd cars now. "It only weighs between 113,000 and 117,000 pounds. In the medium term, repairs could be carried out on the bridges posing problems in order to bring back a conventional train. The locomotive of a conventional train weighs 260,000, and the bearing capacity of the most affected of our bridges is not much below that."

VIA Rail's passenger train has been suspended in the Gaspé Peninsula since September 2013. Until 2010 when the region's train went all the way to Gaspé, it carried close to 30,000 people yearly, making it, VIA Rail's busiest regional train.

Wood chip car test

Meanwhile, the Gaspésie Railway Society is currently running tests with a freight car leased in the United States in order to verify its eventual use on the Temrex sawmill's woodchip traffic.

"We are presently using CN's woodchip cars but CN wants to assign them to another line. We want to replace them with our own cars. CN is charging us a lot for the use of its cars so we are making no profit on that freight. The car we are running tests with is designed to haul scrap metal but its capacity (6,700 square feet) is exactly the same as CN's woodchip cars," explains Éric Dubé.

The American owner of the car has a pool that is big enough to meet the needs of the Gaspésie Railway Society and then some.

"We need 24 cars and we would buy 27, in order to have some extras for maintenance purposes," adds Mr. Dubé.

Six cars are loaded every day at the Temrex sawmill, for delivery to the FF. Soucy paper mill in Rivière-du-Loup.

The Gaspésie Railway Society is considering another option for the woodchip freight, buying brand new cars.

"The American cars will only last 10 years. We are therefore weighing the option of new cars," states Mr. Dubé.

The Gaspésie Railway Society is owned by the MRCs of Côte-de-Gaspé, Percé Rock, Bonaventure and Avignon.

Buying the American cars would cost \$1.3 million, tax and custom fees included. New cars would probably cost dou-

ble that amount, maybe a bit more.

"I have little doubt about the profitability of the venture. We now have to convince the banks or the MRCs of the relevance of the project. We can also find a private investor but then he will make money instead of us. We are condemned to find a solution," says Mr. Dubé.

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