

## Group trying to put pressure in order to restore VIA Rail's passenger train

Gilles Gagné

NEW CARLISLE: – A group of citizens consisting of Gaspésians living here and away is currently working on convincing various authorities to bring the VIA Rail passenger train back to New Carlisle or even Gaspé. Some members of the group will try to meet Quebec's Transport Minister Robert Poëti over the next two weeks.

The current leader of the group is Paspebiac's Gilles Lamy, a retired employee of VIA Rail and Canadian National. He believes that the use of Budd cars, a type of automotive cars that was used in the Gaspé Peninsula at various periods, mainly in the 1960s and 1970s, would be a good start.

"Now that the ownership of the line is settled, I think it is possible to restore the service between Matapédia and Gaspé, or at least between Matapédia and New Carlisle as a first phase," says Mr. Lamy, who worked on trains for 38 years, mostly in the Gaspé Peninsula.

"A Budd car only weighs 113,000 pounds. The Budd cars weigh far less than the locomotives VIA used here, which weighed about 260,000 pounds. Our bridges certainly have the capacity to support Budd cars, and probably down to Gaspé," says Gilles Lamy.

Barachois' Cynthia Patterson, of Rural Dignity, Bernard Babin, a New Carlisle living in Breakeyville near Quebec City and Member of Parliament for the Gaspé Peninsula and Magdalen Islands, Philip Toone, are also working closely with Mr. Lamy.

He has met with various stakeholders lately, like Gilles Babin of Rail GD, the New Richmond shop repairing rail cars and locomotives, and Luc Lévesque, the interim director general of the Gaspésie Railway Society. That body controlled by the four MRCs located between Matapédia and Gaspé has lost the property of the line over the winter, due to financial problems, but remains the operator of the freight train. Transport-Québec bought the

line.

"We have to do an updated study of the bridges' bearing capacity. It probably will cost about \$40,000 to \$45,000. We will then know what we can do on the line," adds Mr. Lamy about what he intends to tell Transport Minister Poëti.

He is convinced that the two bridges spanning the Cascapédia River can safely support a conventional VIA Rail train, considering the weight of the April 25 train full of windmill tower sections that circulated between New Richmond and Matapédia. He also takes into account the weight of the locomotives used by the Gaspésie Railway Society, which weigh around 248,000 pounds, which is not a great deal lighter than VIA Rail's engines.

"If the Cascapédia River bridges are sound, and considering the average work that must be carried out on two bridges located in Caplan, the Ruisselet and the Ruisseau-Leblanc ones, I think that we can bring back a conventional train to New Carlisle soon, and the Budd cars down to Gaspé at the same time. A washout must also be repaired in Port Daniel in order to achieve that but it is quite feasible," states Mr. Lamy.

"We have the right to get train service. We are still part of Canada. Since 1995, VIA Rail has turned its train in New Carlisle hundreds of times instead of going all the way to Gaspé, because the management didn't want the Gaspé train to make the Halifax train wait for the same night return. We have often been neglected by VIA Rail in the Gaspé. It will be four years in December that the Gaspé Town citizens have not been served by a train, and two years next fall that the Bay of Chaleur population has lost its train. It is time to get the service back," he points out.

He favours the return of a conventional train between New Carlisle and Matapédia because of the passengers' comfort. "Merging the Halifax and Gaspé trains in Matapédia occurs at 10 p.m. and

the trains are separated in the morning at about 5 a.m. in the other direction. Transferring from Budd cars to a conventional train in Matapédia and the other way around in the morning would be very inconvenient for the clientele, like the elderly and the families with young kids, often the bulk of our riders," says Mr. Lamy.

Member of Parliament Philip Toone is also active in the file. He recently resumed petitions asking federal minister of Transport Lisa Raitt to discuss with VIA Rail and give the public transporter the means to fulfil its mandate across the country, especially in the Gaspé Peninsula. He will send a copy of the petition to Robert Poëti.

"The timing is good. The government of Quebec now owns the line and has the capacity to entertain a long term vision for it. It would not take an enormous investment to bring back at least the Budd cars. Moreover, the Gaspé Peninsula could find itself without a bus service next year, as Orléans Express has voiced its intent to pull out completely east of Rimouski," explains Mr. Toone.

Among other things, Bernard Babin is gathering some statistics about the ridership of the Matapédia-Gaspé train in order to back the arguments that will be presented by the group to minister Poëti.

"Our train is an essential service, for people of various walks of life, the elderly, tourists, youth and business people," he says.

Other people, like Port Daniel's Anthony Bernard Prince, come to form a supporting cast around the group leaders.

"Bernard Babin contacted me last week and asked me to help him and many others who are trying to get VIA Rail services back on the coast. I have been operating a facebook page called: Help Save The Railway on The Gaspé Coast, for quite some time. It is a place where people can express their opinion about how the suspension of the train service has affected

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VIA RAIL:

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Photo: Courtesy of Bernard Babin

*Budd cars have circulated along the Gaspé Peninsula line over the years, starting in the mid-sixties, like in Gaspé, when Canadian National was still in charge of some of the country's passenger service.*

their lives. Most of these comments will be sent to Ottawa to help convince the government that we need the train," says Mr. Prince.

"Also I will be going around my community with a petition this weekend. Personally I haven't done much travelling by train since I'm only young. However, if I needed to travel in the future for any reason, I would like to go by train (...) Everyone I talk to has had a friend or a relative that worked on the train, or on the railroad. My grandfather worked for the railroad one year shovelling snow off the tracks. Just think about the men who built this beautiful railway with so little

machinery to work with. It would be a shame to see the tracks pulled up someday. The railway and the passenger train service have been a part of our lives for generations. That's why I am working to try and get the passenger train running again. The railroad and the train are a part of all Gaspésians," concludes Mr. Prince.

VIA Rail suspended its service between New Carlisle and Gaspé in December 2011 because of the questionable state of some bridges, and between Matapédia and New Carlisle in August 2013. The bus that replaced the train after August was pulled out at the end of October 2013.