

MNA Lelièvre criticizes Minister Poëti's derogatory remarks about the Gaspésie Railway Society

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: - Gaétan Lelièvre, the Gaspé riding MNA, enthusiastically criticized the derogatory remarks made twice by Quebec Transport Minister Robert Poëti, to the effect that the management of the Gaspésie Railway Society was a "disaster", and that the Amiral tourist train was unnecessary for the cruise ship industry, unless proven otherwise.

Minister Poëti initially made these remarks when interviewed by Radio-Gaspésie in Gaspé on September 18, and a second time during the September 23 Radio-Canada morning show.

The minister said that the Amiral tourist train is highly unprofitable, having allegedly "declared a deficit of \$200,000 last year," and that his ministry wouldn't guarantee the return of the train for next year unless a business plan is set up and proves that it is profitable. The Gaspé to Percé line needs repairs in Haldimand and Douglastown, and Quebec's ministry of Transport now owns that line.

Most of Minister Poëti's statements are being disputed by those involved in the management of the Amiral, who maintain that the train clears \$10,000 per trip when transporting cruise ship passengers, which occurred six times in 2014. Member of the National Assembly Lelièvre adds his view to the opposition movement.

"We are used to hearing, Minister Poëti, in that tone. He can be insulting. It is the first time that he has questioned the relevance of investing in the line between Gaspé and Percé. He had already given us a sign though, since Transport Québec did not invest in the Haldimand bridge repairs this year, despite the fact that work had begun last year," says Gaétan Lelièvre.

"Declaring that the Amiral

train lost \$200,000 in 2014 is false and irresponsible. A power generator worth \$50,000 is included in that amount, as well as other equipment worth \$100,000. These items should have been considered as material to be amortized over X number of years, not one, like the minister did," explains the Gaspé riding MNA.

"Clearly he doesn't know the Amiral file. It is now clear that the Quebec government doesn't want to invest in the eastern end of the rail line, contrary to what Robert Poëti said when the government bought the Matapedia to Gaspé network in March. He then said that the Gaspé-Percé stretch would be maintained in order to accommodate the Amiral. It confirms that Transport-Québec administration, the civil servants, don't want to work on the eastern portion of the Gaspé rail line. They are the ones who make recommendations to the minister," says Mr. Lelièvre.

He clearly asked if the "Quebec government would provide the Gaspé Peninsula with the transportation means it needs."

Gaétan Lelièvre conceded that the future of the Gaspé Peninsula rail line needed some political support.

"Strictly based on financial terms, the line is not profitable at the present time but it is a development tool. When I was in the Parti Québécois cabinet, I had to fight with Transport Québec civil servants to convince them that the line was vital to our community. I also convinced then Minister Sylvain Gaudreau of the same thing. Until the election of the Couillard government, the Liberals and the Parti Québécois allotted money for line improvements and for infrastructures, between 2007 and the beginning of 2014. The current government is the first one to fail in that re-

gard," says Mr. Lelièvre.

He continued. "The government has bought a line for \$3.9 million that has a net salvage value of \$28 million, and seems to have decided to phase down the section east of Caplan. Minister Poëti says that they saved the line. They have not saved anything. They are doing close to nothing with it. They are depriving the region of a development tool. They are so eager to reach zero deficit that they aren't investing in important infrastructure," stated Mr. Lelièvre.

The Gaspé MNA is not impressed with Robert Poëti's statement to the effect that the Gaspésie Railway Society must submit a business plan in order to convince him that the Amiral is worth justifying line improvements between Gaspé and Percé, a section currently closed to traffic for safety matters.

"When you want to kill a file and buy some time, you ask for studies and business plans. Minister Poëti has numbers regarding the \$10,000 per trip profitability of the Amiral tourist train since September 14. He is showing either ignorance or bad faith," says Mr. Lelièvre.

He complained that Robert Poëti has dubbed as "disastrous" the management of the Gaspésie Railway Society over the years.

"The mayors and prefects saved the line in 2007 and administered it to the best of their knowledge, which truthfully was sometimes limited. I have praise for that effort. No one else was ready to do it. They made mistakes, but who doesn't? They could have received better backing from Transport-Québec. The Gaspésie Railway Society wouldn't have dealt with tribunal protection had Quebec's ministry of Transport allotted a level of support comparable to the one forwarded by previous governments," he states.