



Photo: G. Gagné

Bernard Babin and Gilles Lamy have been working for several weeks to set up a meeting with Quebec Transport Minister Robert Poëti.

Over 4,600 people support effort to bring back the train

Gilles Gagné

CHANDLER: – The initiative spearheaded by a group of Gaspésians wanting to bring back VIA Rail’s passenger train between Matapédia and Gaspé is getting a lot of support. More than 4,600 people have signed petitions and cards to reinstate the service and more than 60 people attended a public meeting in Chandler on June 19 to learn more about the project.

Petitions will keep circulating over the coming weeks and will eventually be sent to federal Transport Minister Lisa Raitt. A copy will also be forwarded to Quebec’s Transport Minister Robert Poëti. Up to 2,600 people have signed petitions while 2,000 more have sent cards expressing the same train service request. The cards are being forwarded by Gaspésie-Magdalen Islands Member of Parliament Philip Toone.

The three main members of the group working to bring back VIA Rail east of Matapédia, Gilles Lamy, Bernard Babin and Mr. Toone, will meet with Mr. Poëti on June 29 in Quebec City.

In Chandler, they received praise after presenting their project and answering numerous questions about the details of their initiative, based on convincing VIA Rail to assign two automotive cars, also called Budd cars, between Matapédia and Gaspé. Budd cars weigh about 117,000

pounds each, which is less than half of the locomotives used by VIA Rail, at 260,000 pounds. Gaspésians of a certain age will remember that Budd cars serviced their line during some stretches of the 1960s, 1970s and during the first part of the 1980s, until the end of May 1983.

Gilles Lamy and Bernard Babin explained that “the purpose of the Quebec City meeting with Minister Poëti is to get the money necessary to study the bearing capacity of all the bridges located between Matapédia and Gaspé.”

It would be an update of a study carried out two years ago. That previous study raised sufficient doubts at VIA Rail’s management to interrupt the service.

The second goal of the meeting with Minister Poëti is to convince the minister that the line has to be upgraded to accommodate the Budd cars and eventually, the conventional train that used to serve Gaspésians until 2013.

On that point, Philip Toone also emphasized that the federal government has to do its share.

“The federal government has not invested one cent in the Gaspé Peninsula rail line since 2011,” said Mr. Toone. He added that Ottawa can contribute to a railway owned by a province, which is the case of the Matapédia-Gaspé line since April.

“They could use the federal infrastructure programs. There

is a federal-provincial infrastructure program that can fill that need. Ottawa can also invest to improve VIA Rail’s service. Under the Finance department tenure of the late Jim Flaherty, they (federal departments) invested \$950 million to upgrade the Montreal-Toronto line for VIA Rail’s purposes. They could certainly take an interest in doing it here. Let’s not forget that the federal government also invested \$15 million in New Brunswick to improve the line between Bathurst and Moncton,” said Mr. Toone.

Philip Toone pointed out that the last study revealed that \$107 million would fix the bridges, the biggest concern, and the rail bed. He said that some of that money has already been invested by the Quebec government, that it will be a step-by-step approach.

Gilles Lamy, who is a retired VIA Rail and Canadian National employee, remarked that in 2009, Canadian National’s test train covered the line, led by a locomotive weighing in excess of 440,000 pounds, with a gauge freight car of 250,000 pounds.

“All the bridges held and the test train revealed that the line was in perfect shape (...) It can’t have deteriorated to such a degree that we can’t pass with Budd cars,” said Mr. Lamy.

Shigawake resident, Garry

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VIA RAIL:

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Hayes, wondered if a government run by the New Democratic Party (NDP) would allow sufficient funding to fix the Gaspé Peninsula rail line.

Philip Toone, who is an NDP Member of Parliament, replied that his party precisely submitted a bill, C-640, to the House of Commons earlier this year in order to supply VIA Rail with a budget that would allow the transporter to offer a better service all over Canada, including regions like the Gaspé.

Bernard Babin clarified a point, that the current initiative to bring back the train “is not linked to a political party. Mr. Toone helped us with this file.”

Many people attending the Chandler meeting made suggestions and offered help, including Eileen Jessop, who now lives in Ottawa but is originally from Newport.

“Is your project a first step? I mean, it would be the first step with three days a week. I am hoping that we could get the train five times a week (...) What do you expect from us?” she asked.

Gilles Lamy insisted that,

“after completing the study on the line’s capacity” and the use of Budd cars as a first step, “the objective is the return of a conventional train.”

As for the frequency, Philip Toone added that “six and even seven times a week is foreseeable (...) We want railway customers. VIA Rail would be an important source of revenues. But we are not talking about the schedule today (...) First, we need to get those cars on our rails.”

Bernard Babin invited Mrs. Jessop to sign the card sent by Mr. Toone, the online petition or the paper petition. “Don’t be shy; talk about the train and help us get support.”

New Carlisle’s Sandi Beebe said that “some people don’t come to the Gaspé during the summer because there is no train (...) It (tourism) is our bread and butter.”

Elizabeth Ballans, from Sainte-Georges-de-Malbay made an appreciated comment when she remarked that using Budd cars will force people to change trains very early in the morning and late at night in Matapédia, considering that those units cannot be added to the conventional train linking Montreal and Halifax, and that there is no sleeping accommodation in

them. “I would like to see the old way (a conventional train) back eventually.”

Gilles Lamy, Bernard Babin and Philip Toone insisted on the use of Budd cars being a first step towards the return of a conventional train.

Michael Trépanier, a Gaspésie Railway Society employee who insisted he was not talking on behalf of

the company, says that VIA Rail’s right of way revenues pay for the 30 people working on track maintenance when the train goes down to Gaspé.

“Out of the \$107 million needed to fix the line, up to \$40 million would go to engineering firms (...) The bridges pose a problem but the line itself is fine,” he

stated.

VIA Rail service has been suspended since the fall of 2013, due to an assessment of the bridges revealing that some of them had to be upgraded or replaced. The use of a saline solution as a herbicide also triggered VIA Rail’s concern, as a number of grade crossings had to be fixed, due to corrosion.