

Private and public partnership could be the future of the railway

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: - Éric Dubé, president of the Gaspésie Railway Society believes that a partnership which would bring together private businesses and public entities will probably be the future of rail services on the Gaspé Peninsula.

The proposal submitted to Transport-Québec by a group of business people led by Gilles Babin wasn't a surprise to Éric Dubé, who was appointed president of the Gaspésie Railway Society 11 months ago.

"It will look like a private-public partnership. We think that the line will remain the property of the MRCs and that the operations will be carried out by private interests," he says.

According to Gilles Babin's plan, the group he heads will buy the line between Matapédia and Caplan in phase one and could possibly buy more tracks as business opportunities arise.

"We will have more discussions on this in the near future. We think that keeping the line under the ownership of the MRCs is a safer way to protect it from dismantling. We think that Transport-Québec will not want to sell the network to private interests. Nevertheless, Gilles Babin's project is promising," states Éric Dubé.

On January 20 Transport-Québec announced that \$100,000 is being granted so that the Gaspésie Railway Society can run for another month, while a restructuring plan is being prepared. A day prior to that, Mr. Dubé had been able to convince three of the four MRCs who own the rail line to each allot \$50,000 for the future development of the network.

"Since the line property was transferred to the MRCs in 2006-2007, they hadn't invested in it. We now have \$150,000 for the future. At first we thought that the money would be earmarked to assure the freight service for the coming weeks. We didn't know that Transport-Québec had allocated \$100,000 at that time," Éric Dubé pointed out.

He believes that the



Photo: Gilles Gagné

Grain being loaded on a train in Caplan.

Gaspésie Railway Society will submit an interesting restructuring plan to the creditors on February 4, a plan that will likely require further fine-tuning.

"The judge and creditors will have a project to analyze. If we don't have a project, we won't get another delay of court protection," stated Mr. Dubé.

Modernizing some of the Gaspésie Railway Society's equipment represents an aspect of the restructuring plan targeted by Mr. Dubé, "in order to reduce our maintenance costs. We are not hiding the fact that the money will come largely from the government."

A recent assessment made by the Gaspésie Railway Society engineer determined that the two bridges on the Cascapédia River in Cascapédia-St. Jules could be repaired for approximately \$500,000 and last five or six more years. "It would prevent us from asking for between \$10 and \$15 million to replace them shortly. The current reality is that traffic to New Richmond and Caplan is light, despite the huge impact on the economy from a company such as Rail GD," he says.

As for the section of the rail line east of Caplan, he agrees with Gilles Babin. "We will not invest money as long as we don't have a transportation project. Over the short term, if McInnis Cement in Port Daniel contacts us to haul freight, we will integrate that portion of the line into our plan rapidly."

Éric Dubé wants VIA Rail back to New Carlisle as soon

as possible. "We must take the appropriate steps to save the line first," he adds.

The three MRCs that have each set aside \$50,000 for the Gaspésie Railway Society's restructuring plan are Avignon, Bonaventure and Côte-de-Gaspé. The Percé Rock MRC has refused, says its prefect, Diane Lebouthillier.

"It's not complicated. We haven't received any formal request, documents, or calls. Over the last three years, the train hasn't passed here and we have no clue about when it will pass again," Ms. Lebouthillier stated.

The Amiral Tourist Train nevertheless linked Gaspé and Percé last year, the SPEC reminded her.

"This is another matter. In the future we will see how we can deal with that. \$50,000 is a lot of money for the Percé Rock MRC and we want a little more information. We have to keep in mind that at the present time the tourist train is "owned" by the receiver," she adds.

The cement plant currently under construction in Port Daniel is located in the Percé Rock MRC and will probably need rail service at one point, she is also stated.

"Most of the production will be hauled by ships. Actually, it is time to have serious talks about transportation in the area. We have issues with roads, rail, sea and air transportation. We will not be able to have them all. Personally, I want to put the emphasis on air transportation," she concluded.