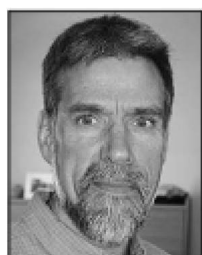


Editorial page



Commentary Gilles Gagné

The return of the passenger train: the time is right

The return of VIA Rail's passenger train on the Matapédia to Gaspé line is far from a dead file. This was evident in Chandler last Friday when 60 Gaspésians came to get information about the efforts made by a group pushing the provincial and the federal governments to reinstate the service we had until 2013.

The project spearheaded by Gilles Lamy, Bernard Babin and Member of Parliament Philip Toone makes a lot of sense. It has many advantages. Here are some of them.

Using Budd cars would accelerate the process of getting our train back. They are light automotive cars. Considering the reduced bearing capacity of some of the bridges located between Matapédia and Gaspé, specifically between Cascapédia-St. Jules and Douglastown, the amount of repair could be done in phases, using Budd cars as the first step.

VIA Rail won't confirm it for now but some Budd cars, at least two, are available, which makes the initiative feasible. If they are not, the number of Budd cars that could be refurbished between now and the resumption of the Matapédia-Gaspé service is considerable.

They would fill an important need. During the last four full years of operation between Matapédia and Gaspé (2008 to 2011), Via Rail carried between 27,000 and 29,600 people annually. On the average, it represents 190 travellers per day. It tells a lot about the usefulness of the train for Gaspésians, as Or-

léans Express cut one round trip service in January because of low ridership. It says that over long distances, regardless of the season, the train is clearly the best travelling option.

Those remarkable statistics outmatch single-handedly the combined total of VIA Rail's two other Quebec regional services, to Abitibi and Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean. Those numbers were achieved despite very poor decision making by VIA Rail, as the public transporter often neglected to take the appropriate measures over the last 20 years to have its Gaspésian train reach its final destination, Gaspé. VIA Rail's decision to run the Gaspé and Halifax trains together, even during peak seasons, contributed to a decline in the number of passengers.

The only way to come from Montreal, Quebec City or even Rimouski since January is on overnight bus. Considering the number of elderly people, young families and tourists travelling between the Gaspé Peninsula and the rest of the country and beyond, the absence of comfortable overnight transportation, which the train used to provide, is totally unacceptable.

The "profitability" aspect of the file is often mentioned, mostly by the federal and provincial governments. It is a misleading argument. There is not a single profitable passenger train service in the world, even in France or in Japan. The TGV and the Bullet might be profitable on a daily basis, but that aspect doesn't take into account the tens of billions of dollars that were invested by the French and Japanese governments to pay for high speed reserved corridors and the rolling stock. In countries that have evolved, transportation-wise, allowing sound public transportation means that people and goods can expect efficient transport at a reasonable cost. Quebec and Canada are losing ground in that area.

The safety of the Gaspé Peninsula line is an issue but not as large as people think. The rail bed is in good shape, overall. Some of our bridges need repairs, sometimes replacements. Gaspésians shouldn't feel uncomfortable about that. They deserve it. Between 2008 and this year, the annual amount spent on Route 132 in the region has hovered between \$59 million and \$136 million. Why would we feel like beggars? Between 1980 and 1996, Canadian National neglected its Gaspé Peninsula line despite making good revenues on it. The Quebec Railway Society also neglected the line and the Gaspésie Railway Society, despite questionable decision-making, never had the means to do the appropriate repairs. So here we are, after 35 years of neglect, with a line that needs better bridges. We deserve it. With less than \$100 million, we will have a safe line for the next 30 years, for passenger and freight traffic. It will also protect Route 132 from premature wear and tear if trucks are taken off the road. Environmentally, the train is also much more efficient.

Gilles Lamy, Bernard Babin and Philip Toone, as well as the public interested in our train service, are aware that the ideal thing would be to bring back a conventional train, and that a daily train, like we had until January 1990, would also be a necessity.

However, right now, the emergency lies with the return of a passenger train, period. Since it will probably rest on a political decision, the more support the group gets, the better are its chances of reinstating this service.