



Photo: G. Gélinas

*The Amiral tourist train needs to operate because if it doesn't, it will require millions of dollars in repairs," warns Éric Dubé, president of the Gaspésie Railway Society.*

## Amiral tourist train immobilized for a second year

Geneviève **Gélinas**

**GASPÉ:** – The Amiral tourist train won't operate in 2016, for a second year, because the necessary repairs haven't been made on the rail line between Gaspé and Corner of the Beach. That situation makes the Gaspé Peninsula more difficult to sell to cruise ship operators, to the point where Escale Gaspésie is searching for other solutions to transport cruise passengers.

L'Amiral has been immobilized at the Gaspé station since the fall of 2014. The Quebec Transport Ministry, owner of the railway, won't authorize it to operate for safety reasons. The Quebec government has not committed to doing the \$4.5 million repairs that are necessary, according to the Transport department, for L'Amiral to circulate.

"On the cruise ship market, the train withdrawal from the Gaspé offer has a detrimental effect," says Stéphane Sainte-Croix, of Escale Gaspésie. The train isn't only a tourist product, but also "a logistics tool", he states. By boarding 225 people at a time to get to Percé, it frees buses.

"It's a powerful argument to attract cruise ship operators. When we sold the Gaspé stop to the Queen Mary (to come in October), the train was supposed to be operating," he adds.

Escale Gaspésie is starting a new marketing cycle to attract cruise ships in 2017 and the coming years. "We're filling our calendar more slowly (...). I have to work harder to sell the Gaspé. There's an im-

pact," Mr. Sainte-Croix observes.

The municipal representatives want a meeting with Transport Minister Jacques Daoust and Tourism Minister Julie Boulet, to have them sit together at the same table. Gaspé Mayor Daniel Côté wants the Quebec government to understand that the train provides significant spinoffs.

"The Amiral in itself is profitable, but Quebec would like its operations to justify the maintenance of the railway (...). But nobody is asking any business to make the maintenance of Highway 132 profitable!"

According to Transport Québec, finishing the repairs to the Haldimand bridge would cost \$3.5 million, and moving part of the railway located close to a fault in Douglstown would cost \$1 million.

This amount isn't that expensive considering the cost of other transportation infrastructure, says the mayor. "\$4.5 million, is peanuts, when the governments could pay \$400 million to repaint the Quebec bridge!"

Escale Gaspésie is searching for an alternative to the train, not to be at the mercy of a governmental decision. The organization is thinking about buying buses. "We can buy them, make them unique, lend

them to other destinations. We'll stop waiting for the train," states Mr. Sainte-Croix.

Bringing The Amiral back to Chaleur Bay for the locomotive to be used for freight transportation isn't possible, says Daniel Côté. "The train cost was \$2.4 million. From that amount, the federal and provincial governments gave \$1.8 million in grants, from programs set up to develop cruise ports of call. If we use the train to transport freight, Canada Economic Development is going to claim its due."

The president of the Gaspésie Railway Society, Éric Dubé, points out that the repairs on the Haldimand bridge were stopped in 2014, because of a lack of money. "If it had been done in 2014, perhaps it would have only cost \$1 million (instead of \$3.5 million) because everything was there: the employees and the equipment."

As for the Douglstown fault, "we've always monitored it," adds Mr. Dubé, but the security standards have been tightened since the Lake Megantic tragedy.

Otherwise, the Amiral "needs to operate because if it doesn't, it will take millions of dollars to repair it. It's like a car, if you leave it outside in your backyard without using it for two years, it will deteriorate."

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