

Coalition for the future of the train wants to send 1000 letters to Justin Trudeau

Gilles Gagné

NEW CARLISLE: – Help Save the train on the Gaspé Coast, a coalition founded in the fall of 2013, to bring back the VIA Rail passenger train between Matapédia and Gaspé, is calling upon the population to convince Justin Trudeau that the new federal government should fund the railway infrastructure of the Gaspé Peninsula.

The coalition has released a letter that people can sign and send to Trudeau. Less than three weeks after informally publishing the letter template online, more than 574 people have signed and sent it to Canada's prime minister. The goal is 1,000 letters.

"We haven't even started a real campaign to publicize the letter and the necessity to sign, comment and mail it, and people are proceeding. It gives us a pretty good idea about the importance of the passenger train's return for the public," states Bernard Babin, one of the main initiators of the Help Save the train on the Gaspé Coast coalition.

Mr. Babin, a former resident of New Carlisle living in the Breakeyville suburb of Lévis, near Quebec City, is "satisfied with the progress made in 2015". The first months were devoted to organizing the coalition and they were followed in June by a well-attended public meeting in Chandler on June 19, and a meeting with Quebec transport minister Robert Poëti on June 30 in Quebec City. That meeting was prompted by the fact that Quebec's ministry of Transport acquired the Matapédia to Gaspé railway in May, after announcing it in March.

The Quebec government paid \$3.9 million to acquire that line, which corresponds to the debt the Gaspésie Railway Society had accumulated. A corporation founded by the municipalities of the four MRCs located along the line, the Gaspésie Railway Society received \$2.8 million to operate the line for two years, as the Quebec government decided to keep it as the line operator. It remained the owner of the locomotives, a certain number of maintenance cars, several pieces of land and some equipment.

However, since the beginning of 2014, the Quebec gov-

ernment has not funded the most urgent file pertaining to the Matapédia-Gaspé line, the bridges. Their bearing capacity must be increased in order to bring VIA Rail's conventional passenger trains.

Between 2007 and 2013 though, the Quebec government allotted \$44.5 million for that line, but a chunk of \$15.5 went mainly for the acquisition of the line by the Gaspésie Railway Society and its exploitation. The amount that should have gone to bridge reinforcement was considerably higher, given that the bridges had been neglected for a lengthy period by its former owners, Canadian National and the Quebec Railway Society.

A citizen of Port Daniel, Anthony Bernard Prince, is also quite involved in Help Save the train on the Gaspé Coast. He is the main author of the letter sent to Justin Trudeau. He believes that it is the federal government's turn to hand out money for the Gaspé Peninsula rail line, and thinks that it could trigger further involvement from the Quebec Transport department, often called Transport-Québec.

"Ottawa has not allotted a cent for the Gaspesian rail line since 2011. We have a new government, preparing an important infrastructure program. Road bridges, like Hope Town's, are damaged because of the additional stress caused by a lack of railway services in that area. Look at the Paris agreement and the necessity to go green (environmentally sound solutions). The train is the ideal way to reach those goals. Some people tell me that the passenger train is not used that much. However, in 2011, 27,991 passengers took the train between Montreal and Gaspé, while the two other regional trains in Quebec, Montreal-Jonquière and Montréal-Senneterre, carried less, with 25,870 passengers combined. Our train was used a lot," states Mr. Prince.

VIA Rail suspended its services between Matapédia and Gaspé in September 2013 mainly because of the state of some bridges. A study carried out at the time revealed that \$107 million would be needed to fix all the bridges that require their bearing capacity to be increased. Those repairs would solve the issue for 25



Photo: G. Gagné

The members of the Help Save the train on the Gaspé Coast coalition would like VIA Rail to resume the service with Budd cars like this one. Once the bridges in need of repairs are fixed, the coalition wants a conventional train back.

years.

Paspebiac's Gilles Lamy, a retired employee of the railway and a very active member of the Help Save the train on the Gaspé Coast coalition, stresses that over the short term, his group is opting for the use of Budd cars, automotive units significantly lighter than a Via Rail standard locomotive, for the return of the passenger train. Budd cars weigh about 57 tonnes, compared to 130 tonnes for a conventional train locomotive.

"For the moment, we only need a study confirming that the bridges east of Caplan, those of the line part that was put in a dormant state by the Quebec government, have the capacity to support Budd cars. As far as I am concerned, there is no doubt about their capacity to bear Budd cars," says Mr. Lamy, who worked for VIA Rail and Canadian National for more than 35 years.

The Gaspésie Railway Society handled about 2,000 carloads last year, mainly between Matapédia and Nou-

velle, in order to serve the Temrex sawmill. The Gaspésie Railway Society also sent occasional trains to New Rich-

mond and Caplan, to deliver cars to Fabrication Delta, Rail GD, the Agriculture Coop and farmer Sébastien Brière.

To learn more about this subject:

In English and French, there is a web site:
www.gaspetrain.org
Additional information is also available on two facebook pages:
In English: Help Save the train on the Gaspé Coast
In French: Coalition des Gaspésiens pour l'avenir du train