

Coalition proposes way to return the passenger train to New Carlisle

— Gilles Gagné

NEW CARLISLE: - The Coalition of Gaspésians for the future of the train recently sent a proposal to Quebec's new Transportation Minister, Laurent Lessard, that would allow, if accepted, a quick return of the passenger train between Matapédia and New Carlisle, paired with a bus service to Gaspé.

The Coalition leaders insist that the return to New Carlisle would be a first step before an eventual return of VIA Rail's passenger train all the way to Gaspé. One of those leaders, Bernard Babin, says that the repair cost of the line is reasonable.

"Based on the information we have gathered, an investment of \$5 million would reopen the line between Caplan and New Carlisle. It is 18 miles and it would serve a number of purposes, the local population for sure, but also the tourists and the users of freight services," says Mr. Babin.

He has contacted three transporters owning buses and is convinced that it would be possible to complete the service to Gaspé and include the fare in the train ticket while leaving it at a reasonable cost.

Until now, the Coalition of Gaspésians for the future of the train has promoted the short term use of Budd cars, automotive units that are lighter than the locomotives pulling con-

ventional trains, considering that the bearing capacity of some bridges pose a problem between Matapédia and Gaspé. This is the case of the bridges spanning over the Grand Cascafé River.

"We know that VIA Rail has a preference for the conventional rolling material, and we know that a high proportion of the passengers are fond of the sleeping commodity cars and the observation car. The Budd cars could be used in a phase. There are several scenarios. The goal remains to bring back the passenger train service as quickly as possible, given that Keolis' bus service is far from satisfactory," adds Mr. Babin.

"We received a lot of support from Gaspésians. Up to 10,000 people follow the Coalition's facebook page. The interest is far from dwindling. When Gaspé Peninsula railway news is published regionally, thousands of clicks are recorded. A lot of people also consult our press page at gaspetrain.org," he says.

In mid-September, the Coalition received another form of support in its attempt to bring the train back to New Carlisle quickly when the management of the *Saint-Elzéar Association cooperative forestière* wrote to Minister Lessard and to the Gaspésie Railway Society to request the possibility of loading annually at least 100 cars of lumber in

New Carlisle.

The Saint-Elzéar Cooperative had expressed interest for using the New Carlisle freight yard almost three years ago but now, that interest translates into letters and discussions.

"The New Carlisle option is more productive and less costly. The distance between the Saint-Elzéar sawmill and the New Carlisle yard is only 18 kilometres, one third of the distance between the sawmill and a potential trans-loading spot in New Richmond. There is way more room in New Carlisle. It would also save costs to the Saint-Elzéar sawmill to load closer to the plant," states Mr. Babin.

The Coalition has also sent letters requesting the support of the municipalities located along the Matapédia to Gaspé line, including the MRCs.

"We are already receiving answers. The Percé Rock MRC has sent a unanimous resolution of support. We have received favourable replies from Shigawake and Hope Town. The Bay of Chaleur Chamber of Commerce has also sent us a motion of support," explains Bernard Babin.

Between 2004 and 2013 inclusively, 250,656 people travelled on the Montreal to Gaspé train, for an average of 160 passengers for each of the three weekly trains. The service was suspended at the end of September 2013 due to the state of the line.