

Gaspé Peninsula MNAs urge the province to invest in the rail line

Gilles Gagné

BONAVENTURE: — Gaspé Peninsula Members of the National Assembly, Gaétan Lelièvre and Sylvain Roy, are once again urging the Quebec government to allot the funds that are necessary to make the whole rail line between Matapédia and Gaspé functional again as soon as possible.

The traffic on the 202 mile-line is limited to a stretch of slightly more than one-third of that length, the 80 miles between Matapédia and Caplan. The Caplan-Gaspé stretch is in a dormant state following two decisions made in 2015 by the owner, Quebec's department of Transportation, which announced the acquisition of the whole line in March of that year.

"We come in support of the chambers of commerce, the prefects, the Côte-de-Gaspé MRC, the Town of Gaspé and the tourism boards (...) It is a must to bring back the freight traffic over the whole length of the line," says Gaétan Lelièvre, who represents the riding of Gaspé.

He supports that viewpoint with the hauling requests sent over the last few months by the Gaspésie Railway Society, the former owner of the line. That company owned by the four MRCs of the Gaspé Penin-



Photo: G. Gagné

Gaspé Peninsula MNAs Gaétan Lelièvre and Sylvain Roy think that the stars are aligned to convince Quebec's department of Transportation that upgrading the track as far as Gaspé is quite relevant.

sula's south part remained the operator of the line. One of the business opportunities is currently emerging in New Richmond, as windmill blades made in Gaspé by LM Wind Power are loaded on flat cars to be delivered to the centre-south of the United States.

"The (Quebec) government is forcing LM to export because new windfarms won't be built in Quebec for several years. LM must transport its blades to New Richmond instead of loading them in Gaspé. It costs between \$700,000 and \$800,000 in trans-shipment (...) That cost could be avoided if the line was functional between Caplan and Gaspé," adds Mr. Lelièvre.

He emphasizes that the LM Wind Power plant in Gaspé has just increased its workforce from 200 people to 285, with further possible hiring over the coming year.

The Port Daniel cement plant will also need the railway in 2017 to haul a portion of its production and bring in some of its inputs. McInnis Cement has been communicating that most of its production will be sent by ship. "There is probably no cement plant in North America without rail service," says Gaétan Lelièvre. "There is more, he adds."

"Two Gaspé businesses that don't want to be identified for

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now, will also need the railway for large volumes of freight (...) I have never seen so many converging factors rooting for the railway as those we have now," insists Mr. Lelièvre.

Bonaventure riding's Sylvain Roy reminds us that a petition signed by more than 5,000 people was submitted to the National Assembly in the spring to ask the Quebec government to make the necessary investment to bring VIA Rail's passenger train, back which was suspended in September 2013 because of the state of the rail line, mostly the state of some bridges.

"In a first phase, we must consolidate the freight traffic and then the return of the passenger train, given that VIA Rail is requiring strict norms for its trains," points out Mr. Roy, referring to the fact that VIA Rail locomotives are heavier than the ones used by the Gaspésie Rail Society for its freight trains.

The last study conducted to assess the work necessary to replace the bridges spanning over the Grand Cascapédia River and overall improvements between Matapédia and Gaspé, suggested an investment of \$86 million. That study was completed by Canarail.

Gaétan Lelièvre states that project management carried out by the Gaspésie Railway Society, with the assistance of an engineering firm, would cost way less than \$86 million.

"Last year, many tasks were carried out by the Gaspésie Railway Society for half of the

cost that would have been needed, had the same work been undertaken the way civil servants wanted them to be done," he says.

"The main needs could be filled within the next two years (...) The region is the least endowed in transportation means. We deserve better services in order to enhance our development," adds Mr. Lelièvre.

"In order to develop, a region needs cellular phone and high speed internet services. A means of transportation is just as basic," points out Sylvain Roy.

He and Gaétan Lelièvre believe that the Quebec government is about to announce a significant amount for the Gaspé Peninsula railway, perhaps between \$30 million and \$50 million, "but they want to limit their intervention to the Matapédia-New Carlisle stretch (one half of the network). We hope that our intervention will make them reflect on the importance of repairing the whole line, to Gaspé (...) A stake of that size wouldn't even trigger questions related to the cost in Montreal," they both say.

The two Parti Québécois MNAs think that the politicians, like Transport Minister Laurent Lessard and the minister responsible for the Gaspé Peninsula, Education Minister Sébastien Proulx, might start questioning the decisions made so far by former Transport ministers, Robert Poëti and Jacques Daoust and their civil servants.

"They are stuck on opening the line between Matapédia and Caplan or Matapédia and New Carlisle, while all the po-

tential traffic that is on the table right now would be generated east of New Carlisle. The survival of the railway is on the line," says Gaétan Lelièvre.

In 2015, the Gaspésie Railway Society hauled 1,624 freight cars between Caplan and Matapédia. About 1,500 of them were generated by the Temrex sawmill in Nouvelle.

The hauling requests received by the Gaspésie Railway Society since the middle of the summer could propel the total number of carloads to 10,000 per year. All that traffic would come from the line portion that was put in a dormant state by Quebec's department of Transport.

The LM Wind Power plant in Gaspé could load a few kilometres from its York industrial park facility the 900 flat cars that will be loaded in New Richmond if repairs are not made east of Caplan.

The Association Coopérative forestière de Saint-Elzéar, which operates the Saint-

Elzéar sawmill, has committed to ship at least 100 cars of lumber per year if the company can load them in New Carlisle. That volume would only be a start that could be improved in the following years.

The Port Daniel cement plant has repeatedly expressed its intention to ship out 95% of its production through its marine terminal. That output is now supposed to reach 2.5 million tonnes yearly. Approximately 5%, or 125,000 tonnes, is expected to be sent by land transport. If the rail gets the bulk of that volume, it represents anywhere between 1,000 and 1,250 carloads. That doesn't include some inputs that McInnis Cement could receive by rail.

A significant volume of freight from a company that would like to ship out of Gaspé by rail represents for the moment the largest potential customer for the Gaspésie Rail Society. The commodity and the name of the company cannot be revealed by the railway.

MNA Gaétan Lelièvre also refused to divulge the name of the customer.

The return of VIA Rail east of Matapédia would also add a significant source of revenue for the Gaspésie Railway Society. The last confirmed amount of revenue from VIA Rail for the passing rights between Matapédia and Gaspé was \$610,000 in 2006.

On the passenger train issue, Gilles Lamy, of the Coalition of Gaspeians for the future of the train, points out that his group has also submitted an alternative to the conventional train that could spell the return of VIA Rail east of Matapédia. "We suggest the use of lighter Budd cars in a first phase of the passenger train return."

The intervention of Sylvain Roy and Gaétan Lelièvre followed two attempts to hold meetings with the minister of Transport, Laurent Lessard. A third attempt will be made before then end of November, possibly on November 23.