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Editorial page



Commentary

Gilles Gagné

Gaspésians working together for the future of the train: a remarkable progression

Will Gaspésians succeed in bringing back their passenger train? Chances are greater now than at any point since the service was suspended in September 2013 by VIA Rail Canada.

At the time, the public transporter was invoking safety measures to suspend its service, which consisted of three weekly round trips between Montreal and New Carlisle. Officially, the train was supposed to reach Gaspé, but that destination had already been suspended in December 2011, due to the state of some bridges. The New Carlisle-Gaspé stretch was served through a bus chartered by VIA Rail until Sep-

tember 2013.

The situation in the summer of 2013 was worsened by a bad decision made by the management of the Gaspésie Railway Society at the time, the use of a saline solution as a defoliant. The salt caused electronic problems at grade crossing signals, a situation that contributed to undermine the confidence of VIA Rail in the Gaspésie Railway Society, then the owner of the Matapédia to Gaspé line.

Adversity hit once more following the election of Philippe Couillard's government in April 2014 because former Quebec Transportation Minister Robert Poëti decided to wave any budget likely to upgrade the bridges that were posing a problem. He was then breaking a multi-year streak of investments on the line, as amounts averaging about \$6 million yearly had been allotted since 2007.

That standstill position contributed to the precarious position experienced in November 2014 by the Gaspésie Railway Society, the municipal body that was forced at the beginning of 2015 to relinquish the property of the line.

In March 2015, the Quebec government waved for a second consecutive year an infrastructure envelope that would have led to some repairs on the bridges of the Gaspé line.

At about the same time, worried about the fate of the railway and seeing that Gaspésians' transportation needs were not well taken care of, three men, Bernard Babin, Gilles Lamy and Anthony Bernard Prince put together actions that could lead to improvements.

They created a facebook page and a website, they started writing letters to a number of politicians, including former Member of Parliament for the Gaspé Peninsula and Magdalen Islands riding Philip Toone and Robert Poëti. Mr. Poëti was then in charge at the time of Transport-Québec, the new owner of the Matapédia-Gaspé line.

They came up with a great short to medium term idea, the use of Budd automotive cars, a lighter train, to resume the service sooner, considering the question marks linked to some bridges.

The three Gaspésians were able to get a meeting with Mr. Poëti at the end of June, and received a commitment that Quebec's Transportation department would pay for a study on the bearing capacity of the line's bridges. This has not happened, as the Quebec government has failed so far to live up to that commitment.

However, the movement triggered by Bernard Babin, Gilles Lamy and Anthony Bernard Prince has gained thousands of supporters, and has become a discrete but efficient force.

While the Quebec government is apparently still trying to find the dollars, probably between \$30,000 and \$50,000, so not a fortune, required to assess the bridges, the new Member of National Assembly for the riding of Avignon-Mitis-Matane-Matapédia, Rémi Massé, is deploying efforts to secure the money.

Since Christmas, a letter put online by the "Gaspésians working together for the future of the train" has been downloaded by at least 1,500 people from all over Canada and sent to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, urging him to act on the Peninsula train file.

For now, nothing is official but there are serious discussions being held at VIA Rail to see how the corporation could resume the service in the Gaspé Peninsula. Transport-Québec is also planning some upgrading work on the Gaspé line bridges, for the first time in three years.

It is very early to start celebrating. Gaspésians don't have only friends at VIA Rail Canada, Transport-Québec and Transport-Canada. Some VIA Rail executives don't understand the value of a passenger train outside the Windsor-Quebec City corridor. The same contempt unfortunately characterises some of Transport-Québec and Transport Canada civil servants.

Yet, the best action that can be taken is to maintain the pressure on politicians. It means among other things keeping the pressure on the Prime Minister's office.

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