

Gaspeians working together for the future of the train win award

Gilles Gagné

QUEBEC CITY – The Gaspeians working together for the future of the train, a coalition that has been working towards the return of VIA Rail's passenger train between Matapédia and Gaspé, won a provincial award on March 23 at the annual Groupe TRAQ convention. Groupe TRAQ is an organization which advocates for the progress of rail transportation.

Bernard Babin, Gilles Lamy and Anthony Bernard Prince, the founders of the coalition, received the Richard-Couture award, which goes annually to the person or group of persons that has contributed the most to the advancement of rail transport.

Since the beginning of 2015, the three men have gathered information, prepared documents, written to politicians, attended public and private meetings, met with the former Quebec Minister of Transport, met with the personnel of two Members of Parliament and launched a signature drive to put pressure on Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

The signature drive has been the coalitions most significant move, considering that more than 1,700 people from the Gaspé, as well as elsewhere in Canada have written to Trudeau, asking him to take the appropriate measures needed for VIA Rail to return east of Matapédia.

The president of Groupe TRAQ, Louis-François Garceau, explained that the nomination for Gaspeians working together for the future



Photo: G. Gagné

Left to right: Marc-André Savard, of Port Saguenay, Bernard Babin, Gilles Lamy, Anthony Bernard Prince and Martin Laflamme, of Chemin de fer Sartigan. Marc-André Savard and Martin Laflamme, last year's winners of the Richard-Couture award presented this year's winners.

of the train was submitted by Groupe TRAQ board member, Louis Doyle.

"We were looking for organizations and individuals. We knew that they have been working hard for a year. When Louis Doyle suggested their name, we said yes immediately," says Mr. Garceau.

Upon receiving the award, Bernard Babin emphasized that six main reasons justify the efforts his group has made over the last year to bring the train back.

"It is essential to get health care. Some sick people need care in Rimouski, Quebec City or Montreal. The train is also important for tourism, which is good for the economy of the Gaspé Peninsula. Students from the Gaspé Peninsula use the train to access education outside the region. The railway

service allows a number of companies to create jobs, like Rail GD and Fabrication Delta in New Richmond. The environment and increased traffic (VIA Rail will bring in revenues if the passenger train comes back) are also essential factors," said Mr. Babin.

Gilles Lamy added that their project is centred over the short term around the use of Budd cars, self-propelled passenger cars that have already been used in the Gaspé Peninsula. That project was presented to the former Minister of Transport, Robert Poëti on June 30, 2015 in Quebec City. He was replaced in the January cabinet shuffle by Jacques Daoust.

Transport-Québec was supposed to fund a study following that meeting but so far, that level of government has not al-

lotted the money to carry it out.

"We need a study that will determine the bearing capacity of the bridges and confirm that Budd cars can pass. A Budd car weighs 54 tonnes while a VIA Rail conventional locomotive weighs 130 tonnes. I am convinced that Budd cars can easily and safely get to New Carlisle in a first phase, and then to Gaspé. That would be a temporary solution. What we want is the return of a conventional train of VIA Rail all the way to Gaspé," explained Mr. Lamy.

Anthony Bernard Prince said that "the return of the passenger train will be our biggest reward. Let's hope all our hard work will pay off."

Transport-Québec was represented at the Groupe TRAQ convention by a few people,

including Jean-Marc Bissonnette, the director of rail services for the ministry. Josée Hallée, director of marine, rail and aerial services for the same department was supposed to attend but cancelled at the last minute.

Despite his high rank status, Jean-Marc Bissonnette refused to give an interview to the SPEC about the budget Transport-Québec, the owner of the Matapédia to Gaspé line, could earmark this year for that stretch of railway.

"I am not allowed to give interviews. Contact our management for communications. I could say things that wouldn't be right," he simply said.

Mr. Bissonnette added that the credits, the way the overall budget will be allotted, will only be known in May. They will be reviewed in April.