

## Gaspésie Railway Society remains operator of the Matapedia to Gaspé line for one more year

— Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: — The Gaspésie Railway Society has been chosen by the owner of the railway, Quebec's Department of Transportation, for the second consecutive year as the operator of the Matapedia-Gaspé line. The renewal of that contract means that \$2.5 million will be given to the Gaspésie Railway Society.

Transport-Québec became the owner of the line in May 2015, two months after agreeing to pay Gaspésie Railway Society's \$3.9 million debt load, which was protected by the company's creditors arrangement act, since November 2014. The Gaspésie Railway Society had owned the Matapedia-Chandler line since 2007 and the Chandler-Gaspé stretch since 1997.

"It is the continuation of the former contract. The conditions remain the same. The only modification pertains to the eastern part of the line, between Percé and Gaspé. That section is now dormant. In fact, it has been dormant since last fall. However, when Quebec's Transportation Department acquired the line in May 2015, the Amiral tourist train was supposed to run during the fall. It was not because of repairs that needed to be carried out on a bridge," explains Éric Dubé, president of the Gaspésie Railway Society.

Former Transport Minister Robert Poëti had first determined in March 2015 that the line between Caplan and Percé would also be put in a dormant state until business

opportunities could justify operating it.

The Gaspésie Railway Society must fill three main tasks with the money received from the Quebec government.

"We must keep the Matapedia to Caplan line open which means hauling a single freight car sometimes even if it is not profitable. We must inspect the line down to Gaspé on a regular basis. We must also replace some culverts, like we did last year. The money doesn't go to our regular operations, which are almost breaking even," explains Éric Dubé.

He and his team do not intend to leave the Caplan to Gaspé line in a dormant state for long.

"We have hauling opportunities east of Caplan like we have never seen. I cannot talk about those opportunities for now but they are very serious," points out M. Dubé, who is also mayor of New Richmond.

He concedes that the McInnis Cement plant in Port Daniel is one of the opportunities. The facility should start production in March or April. He also concedes that wind energy represents another opportunity and he emphasizes that other companies are asking to use the railway.

McInnis Cement intends to use ships to haul the bulk of its production, up to 95%. However, 5% of an annual production of 2.2 million tonnes still translates into 110,000 tonnes, the equivalent of 1,100 carloads. That doesn't include the possibility

of using the railway to bring items to Port Daniel.

LM Wind Power, the Gaspé windmill blade manufacturing plant, has recently signed an agreement with General Electric to deliver a high number of blades to some central and southern parts of the United States. The railway is a feasible way to ship a portion of that production.

"We have reasons to reopen the line to Gaspé and we are moving towards that goal," sums up Mr. Dubé, conscious that Quebec's Department of Transportation has a huge say in that regard.

Up to \$86 million is required to upgrade the line, mainly between Maria and Gaspé. The two bridges spanning over the Grand Cascapedia River have to be replaced,

an investment exceeding \$15 million and probably more. They are currently used but the weight of the cars passing over the bridges is limited to 250,000 pounds. The standard weight of most loaded cars is 263,000 pounds per unit. Another main handicap of the 250,000 pound limit pertains to the locomotives passing on those bridges. Nowadays, very few locomotive models pulling regular freight trains weigh less than 250,000 pounds.

Eric Dubé believes that it is possible to divide the tab of \$86 million, stretch it a bit over a few years and restore the service as far as Gaspé with certain weight limitations.

"We are carrying out an assessment of our needs and we will submit a proposal to

Transport-Québec. We will send our proposal soon but the exercise is not finished," says Mr. Dubé.

He is under the impression that VIA Rail will not be back as long as the two bridges spanning over the Grand Cascapedia river are not replaced. "Nobody says so, but it is an impression. So we have to determine some priorities. The two bridges are among those priorities," explains Mr. Dubé.

New Richmond's Rail GD is also heavily penalized by the limited capacity of those two bridges. The car and locomotive repair shop has stopped bidding on some locomotive repair contracts when the models are too heavy to pass in Cascapedia-St-Jules. It is a significant loss of business.