

MRCs convince Quebec to go back to the drawing board regarding the Matapedia to Gaspé railway

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: – The president of the Gaspésie Railway Society, Éric Dubé, says that the mayors and the prefects have convinced the Quebec government to go back to the drawing board and rethink the use of the budgetary envelope earmarked for the Matapedia to Gaspé railway.

The mayors and the prefects of the Gaspé Peninsula met for more than six hours on December 12 to solve various problems. During that period, they held a half-hour conference call with Sébastien Proulx, minister responsible for the Gaspé Peninsula.

During that conversation, the mayors and prefects told the minister that the railway line must be upgraded and put back in function over its entire length, mostly due to the new reality of hauling windmill blades made in Gaspé by LM Wind Power.

“The government is going back to the drawing board, based on the viewpoint expressed by the MRCs. Over the spring, when the government was planning an intervention for the railway, the hauling of windmill blades was not in the picture. Now, windmill blade transport is planned, for many years to come,” says Éric Dubé, who is also the mayor of New Richmond.

When Minister Proulx was asked if the Quebec government had committed to any kind of time frame, during the conversation, his response was “Nothing is settled, time-wise. We have also asked for



Photo: G. Gagné

The reality of the Gaspésie Railway Society changed over the summer when the LM Wind Power plant in Gaspé signed a big contract to supply windmill blades to the central and southern parts of the United States. Those blades have to be hauled by train. That trend is not likely to change since the LM plant is expanding to fill the needs of other potential American customers.

a meeting with Quebec’s Transport Minister Laurent Lessard. We gathered that it wouldn’t be before Christmas,” adds Mr. Dubé. He will attend that eventual meeting with the president of the Table of prefects, Guy Gallant, of the Avignon MRC.

For part of the spring, rumor had it that the Quebec government was preparing to announce close to \$39 million for the railway between Matapedia and Caplan, or New Carlisle. The uncertain status of then Transport Minister Jacques Daoust might have delayed any announcement. He resigned in August and was replaced by Laurent Lessard, who was also involved in some turmoil, as the Ethics Commissioner investigated his case.

Recently, the amount slated for the Gaspé Peninsula

line was again to be concentrated solely on the Matapedia to New Carlisle stretch, but it was reported to be \$50 million instead of \$39 million. The money was to be used to replace the two bridges spanning over the Grand Cascaedia river, a potential investment hovering between \$20 million and \$30 million. Some other bridges need an increase in their bearing capacity, a condition apparently required by Via Rail to resume the passenger train op-

eration between Matapedia and New Carlisle.

The possibility offered by a contract to haul 600 windmill blades over the next year, and the possibility to get significantly higher revenues if the blades are eventually loaded in Gaspé instead of New Richmond, as well as two major business opportunities, notably linked to the upcoming start-up of the Port Daniel cement plant, shifted the regional priorities in rail transport.

The Table of prefects has expressed a will to prioritize the return of the freight train to Gaspé, just like the two Members of National Assembly representing the Gaspé Peninsula, Gaétan Lelièvre and Sylvain Roy.

The enhancement of the budget to at least \$75 million would favor the return of the freight train and the passenger train to Gaspé, argue the two MNAs. The Matapedia to Gaspé line is owned by the Quebec government since May 2015.

In the meantime, the Gaspésie Railway Society, a company under the control of the municipalities located between Matapedia and Gaspé, is taking steps to increase its freight traffic. The company has recently launched a call for tenders in order to find a contractor that will build and install a cement silo in New Richmond.

“The silo will be used for the transshipment of part of McInnis Cement’s output from Port Daniel. It is temporary because we want to load that cement in Port Daniel but over the short term, we have no choice. We must load it in New Richmond because we can’t offer the service east of Caplan, due to the dormant state of the line,” explains Éric Dubé.

Season's
Greetings