



Motion unanimously adopted for freight train return

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: – On November 30, the Member of the National Assembly for the riding of Gaspé, Gaétan Lelièvre, submitted a motion asking the Quebec government to commit “to the request of Gaspesian political and economic stakeholders who want the return of the freight train over the entire line between Matapedia and Gaspé.” The motion was adopted unanimously.

Over the last few weeks, Gaspesian stakeholders have been begging the government to reopen the Matapedia-Gaspé line along its entire length. At the present time, only the section between Matapedia and Caplan is open, 80 miles out of 202.

All the new transport ventures sent to the Gaspésie Railway Society over the last few months are linked to the Caplan-Gaspé portion of the line, which has been in a dormant state since two government decisions made in 2015.

“The Government of Québec has a responsibility, to facilitate regional development. In this file, the government has a second responsibility, as the owner of

the line. It is one notch higher,” points out Mr. Lelièvre.

He submitted his motion because he was aiming for “the unanimity of all political parties, so they can acknowledge the importance of rail transport in the Gaspé Peninsula.” He wants all these parties to be aware of this vital Gaspé Peninsula issue.

“The region’s best weapon is consensus on this major issue (...) We have not seen a consensus like this since the abolition of the *Conférence régionaux des élus*, two years ago. All the political and economic stakeholders of the regions are going in the same direction, and national organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce Federation, the *Association des exportateurs du Québec* (Quebec’s Exporters Association) and the Employers Council are supporting us,” adds Mr. Lelièvre.

The reopening of the Caplan-Gaspé stretch of railway is being requested with increased vigour lately because LM Wind Power, the blade manufacturing plant located in Gaspé, is exporting blades to the United States by train, and is forced to transport

them by truck to New Richmond at a higher cost in order to load them on flat cars. Other interesting ventures are on the table, including the traffic coming from McInnis Cement in Port Daniel. The potential of all those requests could increase the traffic on the Gaspé Peninsula line to 10,000 carloads annually. It was 1,624 in 2015.

The unanimous adoption of Gaétan Lelièvre’s motion doesn’t dissipate all his worries. He, as a Parti Québécois Member of the National Assembly, is dealing with a Liberal Party government.

“My worry is that the government will proceed with an announcement, by steps, by phases, from west to east, without taking into account the urgent need to reach Gaspé. I fear that it will take a long time, which will hurt the current operations, the expansion and the coming of

businesses to the Gaspé Peninsula. The state of the line, which has not benefited from infrastructure improvements since 2014, is worsening and the repair costs are increasing, if we wait. Unfortunately, it is the strategy chosen by decision-makers, civil servants and politicians, since 2014. I fear that they will wait until the repair costs are such that investing will be considered too costly,” says Mr. Lelièvre.

The Quebec government acquired the Matapedia-Gaspé line in May 2015, officially, two months after confirming its intent. Except for some operational and basic maintenance funding, the government has not invested in the line infrastructure since the beginning of 2014.

The last upgrading assessment carried out for that line, made by Canarail in 2015,

calls for an investment of \$86 million to make it safe for 25 years. A preceding study, made by AECOM in 2014, put the cost in the vicinity of \$122 million.

When facing questions about the upgrading cost of the Gaspé Peninsula line, the three Transport ministers that have been working for the government since April 2014 have always referred to the higher costs of the AECOM study, “as if it was justifying not investing in the line,” points out Gaétan Lelièvre.

On November 29, Québec solidaire Member of the National Assembly for Sainte-Marie-Saint-Jacques, Manon Massé, asked Transport minister Laurent Lessard when the government would make a move for the Gaspé Peninsula railway. Minister Lessard replied that it would come soon and “through steps.”