



Regional Minister Sébastien Proulx admits little change in railway situation since March

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CARLETON – The minister responsible for the Gaspé Peninsula, Sébastien Proulx, admits that the Gaspé Peninsula railway situation doesn't seem to have changed much since his last visit, regarding government actions.

Prior to his October 12 visit, Minister Proulx's last visit to the Bay of Chaleur area took place on March 29. His presence in Carleton on October 12 was linked to the consultation pertaining to educational success, which he presided over as Education Minister. A period of six-and-a-half months separated the

minister's last two visits.

"I am working regularly on the (railway) file. We have funded its operational costs but we must upgrade it," he pointed out, referring to the September \$2.5 million grant that will cover part of Gaspésie Railway Society's operation and maintenance costs for the coming year.

Minister Proulx admitted that he was no more advanced on October 12 than on March 29. He also admitted that a lot of hauling opportunities have arisen since the spring and that "all the arguments are good" to justify improving the Matapédia to Gaspé line.

"I have already expressed my dissatisfaction about that topic. I have some work to do with certain colleagues. I have a new colleague, (Laurent Lessard) the Minister of Transport. So the files are on his desk. I talked to Laurent Lessard and I think that things could evolve fast enough but I am where you are at. I want things to move forward," he said.

He, nevertheless, can't disclose any decision regarding potential infrastructure improvements.

The Gaspésie Railway Society is the former owner of the Matapédia to Gaspé line. It filed for the protection of

the tribunal at the end of November 2014, due in part to the absence of infrastructure funding that would have allowed the transporter to increase its traffic and therefore its revenues. The decision to use salt water as a defoliant in July 2013 also raised doubts about the competence of the former management of Gaspésie Railway Society.

In March 2015 Quebec's department of Transport expressed intentions of acquiring the line, which became effective two months later. The Gaspésie Railway Society remained the line operator, a status that has, so far, been renewed on a yearly basis.

Meanwhile, on October 12 and 13 Québec Solidaire Member of the National Assembly for the riding of Sainte-Marie-Saint-Jacques, Manon Massé, was in the Gaspé Peninsula as part of a Quebec-wide tour to promote the party's economic platform. She strongly criticized the government's lack of action in the railway file.

"The government is not able to invest \$80 million in the railway, an amount that would solve problems and stimulate the economy. I can't understand why Minister Lessard is not coming to

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announce that \$80 million will be invested by his government to guarantee the development of the local businesses that depend on the railway. In addition to that, the return of the passenger train would be assured," commented Ms. Massé. She regularly uses VIA Rail between her Montreal riding and Quebec City.

A CANAC study, released at the beginning of 2016, revealed that \$86 million would suffice to upgrade the line between Matapédia and Gaspé. The bulk of the work needed consists of upgrading some of the bridges. The bearing capacity of these bridges blocks the return of VIA Rail and the handling of some freight traffic.

The Gaspésie Railway Society realizes that several years will be needed to upgrade the bridges. Over the

last three budgets of the current Liberal government, no amount has been allotted for the infrastructures of the Matapédia to Gaspé line. The funds allotted between the end of 2014 and now have only covered part of the Gaspésie Railway Society operational costs.

The line is currently dormant between Caplan and Gaspé but most of the recent requests to haul freight come from that dormant stretch.

The most recent request, made by General Electric, consists of hauling 600 wind mill blades on 900 flat cars. The blades would normally be loaded in Gaspé and delivered to the central part of the United States.

The fact that the line is dormant forces the Gaspésie Railway Society to load the blades in New Richmond. That situation reduces its revenue to about 40% of what it could be, if Gaspé was the point of origin.