

Town of Gaspé and Percé Rock MRC request rail service to Gaspé

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GASPÉ: — Gaspé Mayor, Daniel Côté, Percé Rock MRC Prefect, Nadia Minassian, add their voices to those of numerous stakeholders requesting investments from the Quebec government in order to reopen the railway as far as Gaspé, and as soon as possible.

The statement was presented 10 days after a similar position was expressed on November 18 by the two MNAs representing the Gaspé Peninsula, Sylvain Roy of the riding of Bonaventure and Gaétan Lelièvre, of the Gaspé riding.

Mr. Côté and Ms. Minassian are aware of the rumour that the Quebec government is preparing an announcement about the Gaspé Peninsula railway. However, that announcement would only pertain to line improvements between Matapédia and Caplan, which is the section currently active, or Matapédia and New Carlisle.

“Any investment will be welcome but is it possible to conceive and revive that file while taking into account the solution that will bear the highest results possible? (...) We could have refrained from organizing a press conference and let the government make its announcement that might have included a passenger train down to a certain point. We have instead decided to make our position known,” pointed out Nadia Minassian.

Rumour also has it that the amount of money that could be allotted for the Gaspé Peninsula line would be in the range of \$50 million.

At least three times during the press conference, Ms. Minassian begged the Quebec government to consult the stakeholders of the Gaspé Peninsula. “We don’t like signing a consent on something that doesn’t fill our needs perfectly,” she said, referring to the optimal use of the amount of money the Quebec government could hand out.

Mayor Côté used other words to send the same message. “Can we rebuild a (transportation) model that will optimize our needs? We are in a position to haul the LM Wind Power blades over the short term, and McInnis Cement’s products soon as well. A number of other enterprises have made requests to ship by rail (...) We cannot identify them for now but they are very serious.”

LM Wind Power will haul 900 cars over the next year to

ship 600 windmill blades to the United States, a traffic that will likely increase over the spring of 2017 with an expansion of its Gaspé plant. The flat cars are loaded in New Richmond for now because the line east of Caplan is dormant, thanks to the Transport-Québec decision.

A customer, who remains unidentified for now, is also interested in shipping the equivalent of 5,000 carloads originating from Gaspé. Daniel Côté mentioned that another serious customer has expressed a interest in using the railway from Gaspé.

Nadia Minassian says that the situation has also changed recently in her MRC, hit hard economically since the closure of the Gaspesia paper mill in 1999.

“There are new needs for transportation. We have no choice. I cannot talk on behalf of McInnis Cement but the company management has always said that they will use the railway if it is available. All the investors interested in settling in Chandler’s industrial park or in the industrial zone of Port

Daniel are asking the same question. “Will we be able to use the railway?” It is a must,” she states.

“There is a new industrial effervescence in the Gaspé Peninsula right now. We were plummeting for years but now, we are emerging again. There is one missing tool, the most competitive tool and that is the railway,” adds Daniel Côté.

Depending on the amount earmarked by the Quebec government for the Gaspé line, there might not be enough money to bring the passenger train back to New Carlisle and get the freight train down to Gaspé simultaneously. The Quebec government has owned the Matapédia to Gaspé line since the spring of 2015.

“We think that bringing the freight train to Gaspé comes first. It is likely to save the line,” says Daniel Côté.

“The norms are more strict for passenger trains. It will be easier to bring the freight train back in the short term and work on the passenger train soon

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after that,” says Nadia Minassian.

The Gaspesian stakeholders are supported by at least two Quebec-wide organizations, the *Conseil du patronat* (the Employers Council) and *Manufacturiers et Exportateurs du Québec*, a group representing the province’s manufacturers and exporting enterprises.

The amount of money required to increase the bearing capacity of the line between Matapédia and Gaspé hovers around \$86 million, according to a Canarail study conducted in 2014. That amount would imply the replacement of the two bridges spanning over the Grand Cascapédia river and bringing the passenger train to Gaspé.

Windmill blades are very light by railway standards and their hauling would not require massive investments for now between New Carlisle and Gaspé.

The Quebec department of Transport has so far snubbed the Canarail study, preferring to rely on a previous document stating that \$120 million would be needed to increase the capacity of the entire line. The Quebec government has not invested any money in the Gaspé line infrastructure in 2014, 2015 and 2016.

The former owner of the line, the Gaspésie Railway Society, has remained the operator of the freight train since the Quebec government took ownership of the railway, between March and May 2015.

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