

Train loaded with windmill blades passes first test

Gilles Gagné

MATAPEDIA: – The first windmill blade train assembled in Quebec, and possibly in Eastern Canada, travelled successfully between New Richmond and Matapedia on Saturday, December 3.

With its 72 cars of 28 metres, the train, measuring slightly more than two kilometres in length, or 6,600 feet, was probably the longest, historically, to roll on that stretch of tracks built at the end of the 19th century.

The blades were manufactured by LM Wind Power of Gaspé between September 19 and November. The last two weeks of November and the first two days of December, they were loaded on long flat cars in New Richmond, after a 200 km journey by truck.

The train was followed by many people along its 112 km trip to Matapedia. There were employees of the Gaspésie Railway Society, the operator of the line, sightseers taking in the rather unusual sight, and also several rail enthusiasts, including a few that had covered quite a distance to take pictures and videos of the train.

Laurence Toutant and his girlfriend Nathalie Roger, of Saint-Constant, on the south shore of Montreal, were part of the group of rail enthusiasts. They left home around noon a day prior to the windmill blade train, out of interest to see it. They drove 11 hours to do so.

"Friday morning, we had not decided yet. We had to have our two children babysat



Photo: G. Gagné

The train upon its arrival in Matapedia.

by their grandparents. We left at noon and reached New Richmond at 11:10 p.m.," said Mr. Toutant, who is a locomotive engineer for Canadian National in the Montreal area. It was the first trip to the Gaspé Peninsula for the couple, both aged 32. Why did they make the trip?

"The unexpected," answered Nathalie Roger. "For the sound and visual spectacle of a rail line that I don't know," added Laurence Toutant, who has had a keen interest in trains since his early childhood.

The Roger-Toutant couple

took advantage of the short visit to the Gaspé Peninsula to see a railway acquaintance, François Gagné-Audet. He left La Malbaie, Charlevoix county, on the same Friday, early afternoon, taking the Saint-Siméon-Rivière-du-Loup ferry and reached New Richmond by late evening.

"I am here because I like trains. I have liked them since I was a little kid. We don't see ordinary locomotives here (on that train). They are old school models, diesel locomotives that are closing in on 60 years," he said.

Nathalie Roger and Lau-

rence Toutant left Matapedia shortly after the arrival of the windmill blade train, as he had to return to work, being likely to be called by Canadian National for his next shift.

"I really like the beauty of the scenery, along the Gaspesian line and in general. We will have to come back, and take the passenger train when the service resumes," said Mr. Toutant, referring to the VIA Rail train, suspended east of Matapedia because of the bearing capacity of some bridges.

Satisfaction was also evident on the faces of Éric Dubé

and Luc Lévesque, respectively president and director general of the Gaspésie Railway Society.

"We get revenue here that will be useful to develop other services," summarized Mr. Dubé before the departure of the train.

At least twelve similar trains will leave the Gaspé Peninsula over 2017 with windmill blades made by LM Wind Power for customers of turbine builder GE (General Electric).

At least 600 blades taking space on 900 flat cars will be sent to the south central part of the United States, including Texas. Each blade measuring 42 metres in length, it requires three cars to haul two blades. By railway standards, each blades is very light though, at about 13,500 pounds.

The blades are trucked between Gaspé and New Richmond because the owner of the line, Quebec's department of Transport, put the Caplan to Gaspé stretch in a dormant state in 2015.

Using the railway between Gaspé and New Richmond would triple the revenue of the Gaspésie Railway Society for that traffic. Using trucks between Gaspé and New Richmond adds close to \$800,000 to the cost paid by GE's customers for 600 blades.

The wind mill blade train was taken charge of by Canadian National in Matapedia. It was seen at the Joffre yard on the night of December 4. CN was to haul that train south of the border, where BNSF will make the final delivery.