

VIA Rail president ready to resume service east of Matapedia as soon as the line is safe

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NEW RICHMOND: – The president of VIA Rail Canada, Yves Desjardins-Siciliano, says the public transporter is ready to resume the service east of Matapedia in phases, for example returning to New Carlisle first, and Gaspé later, considering that extensive repairs are needed between the line extremities.

In press releases in the past, the transporter's management stated that three conditions were compulsory before VIA Rail's traffic resumption east of Matapedia, the safety of the users, reasonable speeds on the railway and the necessity to provide the service along the whole line.

During an interview with SPEC on March 14, the president of VIA Rail said that the corporation is ready to compromise temporarily on the destination issue.

"The line requires significant infrastructure work, whether it is \$122 million or \$86 million (the amounts mentioned in two studies

done since 2014), we agree that it is around \$100 million, that it is a significant amount. It won't be done overnight (...) If we can get a shuttle service to reach Gaspé and that people will take the train, we are ready to come back in phases," explained Mr. Desjardins-Siciliano.

He emphasized that once the train stopped going to Gaspé in December 2011, the ridership east of New Carlisle was cut in half, even though VIA Rail was providing a bus service on that stretch.

As for service speed, he remarked that "the train already takes seven-and-a-half hours to cover a distance that cars can cover in four hours." If the train took even more time, he thinks it would not be appealing for the clientele anymore.

When asked if VIA Rail could use automotive units like Budd cars to resume the service, considering their reduced weight on a line in need of rehabilitation, he replied that "the (rolling) material is totally secondary if it

is safe and if the ridership is there. If sleeping accommodations are required, we will not use Budd cars. If the journey is shorter, we might use them. Anything is possible," said Yves Desjardins-Siciliano.

In 2013, the last year the Montréal-Gaspé train was operated before service suspension due mainly to bridge safety issues, VIA Rail declared revenues of \$1.5 million and costs of \$7 million. Those numbers were obtained over less than nine months, with the train stopping in New Carlisle. That

situation required VIA Rail to charter a bus or buses between New Carlisle and Gaspé for far fewer passengers than a train would have attracted.

Yves Desjardins-Siciliano concedes that the revenues were probably double when a train was going all the way to Gaspé. "The operating costs were probably in the \$8 million or \$9 million range then. We understand that it (the Gaspé train) is not a commercially profitable service. It is a regional service that must be supported by the government. People don't

have to worry about ticket prices. We will not increase them to recover our (operational) costs. We must avoid amplifying the (deficit) situation."

Over the last year, a group of citizens, Gaspesians working together for the future of the train, has used various means to put the pressure on politicians in order to convince them that VIA Rail is an essential service in the region. One of those means took the form of a letter sent to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, explaining the main points of the issue.

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