

BUDGET:

No mention of rail line repairs disappoints Gaspesian politicians

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND – The absence of an announcement about the repairs needed to extend railway operations to Gaspé in the Quebec budget is a disappointment for the mayor of Gaspé, Daniel Côté, and the Member of the National Assembly for the riding of Gaspé, Gaétan Lelièvre.

They were expecting a mention about the regional priority in the budget. The Matapédia to Gaspé line requires an investment of \$86 million in order to be functional for 25 years, according to a study carried out by consultant Canarail in 2015. The lion's share of the work is required between Cascapédia-St-Jules and Gaspé.

The line is dormant over two-thirds of its length, due to decisions made in 2015 by Transport Québec, the owner of the line since May of that year. However, all the new requests for freight traffic originate from the dormant part and they total close to 3,000 carloads for this year alone. More requests are expected in 2018. The VIA Rail service has been suspended since 2013.

"There were announcements for the SRB (*Service rapide par bus*) from Quebec City and for the REM (*Réseau électrique de Montréal*, that city's electric light train project) written in black over white in the budget documents. If our regional priority had been there, it would have sent a damn good signal," says Mr. Côté.

"A few years ago, one could have questioned such regional priority choice, when the railway was not as utilized, but presently, there are customers, including a huge one, LM Windpower, which was left behind last year when the government decided that there wouldn't be call for tenders for new wind farms in Quebec. LM turned on a dime and succeeded in finding export contracts filling 100% of its capacity. Three Quebec ministers came in January to inaugurate the expansion of the blade plant and they were all happy. The words were beautiful at the time but we are still waiting on actions," adds the mayor of Gaspé.

Like the mayor of Gaspé,



Photo: G. Gagné

Member of the National Assembly for the riding of Gaspé Gaétan Lelièvre finds it hard to believe that upgrading the railway was completely overlooked in the Quebec budget.

the Member of the National Assembly Lelièvre criticizes the omission of the railway file in the budget, given the regional consensus reached in December on the matter and the fact that the Quebec government has not allotted one dollar for the Gaspesian railway infrastructure over the last three years.

"Minister Carlos Leitao confirmed to Radio-Gaspésie that the file is still under study. It is surprising. I was not expecting that. In December, we heard that the government was ready to allot \$50 million and maybe even \$75 million more recently

(...) However, we can't give up. There are budgetary items that could be there for that need. Each year lost means tens of millions of dollars added to the tab. I can't believe that it will be an electoral stake in 2018," comments Mr. Lelièvre.

LM Windpower is forced to haul its blades by truck between the Gaspé plant and the loading location of railway cars in New Richmond.

For 600 blades, the additional cost related to trucking between Gaspé and New Richmond amounts to \$800,000, roughly \$1,350 more per blade.