

Gaspésie Railway Society president satisfied with monitoring committee meeting

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: – The president of the Gaspésie Railway Society, Éric Dubé, is “very satisfied” with the way his concerns and the concerns of other Gaspé Peninsula stakeholders were received by Quebec’s Department of Transport officials, during the first monitoring committee meeting held since Premier Philippe Couillard announced that the Matapédia-Gaspé line would be repaired all along its length, for \$100 million, maybe more.

Mr. Couillard made that announcement on May 5 and 11 weeks passed before the first meeting of the monitoring committee on July 20, a rather long stretch considering the urgency of putting the railway back in working order between Caplan and Gaspé. That section has been dormant since March 2015, a decision made by Quebec’s Department of Transport after its acquisition of the line.

“It was a first meeting. I was not expecting coming out of it with a calendar including dates of construction contacts and their realization, and seeing that we will be in Gaspé in a year-and-a-half.

The “Office of big projects,” which now supervises the line revamping, was explained to us. We have to get familiar with the process taking charge of the projects over



Photo: G. Gagné

In less than a year, LM Windpower has become the biggest source of revenue for the Gaspésie Railway Society.

\$50 million (...) Overall, I am very satisfied because the Transports Québec people that attended the meeting are in an action mode,” says Éric Dubé.

Besides him, seven other stakeholders from the Gaspé Peninsula attended the meeting, including Luc Lévesque, director general of the Gaspésie Railway Society; Alexandre Boulay, director general of LM Windpower in Gaspé; Hervé Mallet, president and chief executive officer of McInnis Cement in Port Daniel; Nadia Minassian, prefect of the Percé Rock MRC; and the mayor of Gaspé,

Daniel Côté.

“We learned that some calls for tenders are underway for the Matapédia to Caplan stretch, where the studies are done and the needs are known. We have reached the conception of plans and specifications there. There are also calls for tenders linked to the replacement of 20,000 ties and the laying of 20,000 tonnes of

ballast, also between Matapédia and Caplan,” points out Mr. Dubé.

The July 20 meeting didn’t clarify much the magnitude of work that will be carried out this year east of Caplan, where the Gaspésie Railway Society’s two most important sources of revenues are or will be based. Gaspé-based windmill blade manufacturer, LM

Windpower is already the most important customer of the line operator, even if its blades are hauled by truck between the plant and New Richmond, where they are transferred to flat cars. McInnis Cement will become an important customer as soon as its commercial production starts, days or weeks away.

“The reassuring part of the line east of Caplan is that we don’t have to prove that it is an interesting business case, because LM and McInnis Cement are already there. What we have to do now is completing the studies about the workload that remains to be carried out in order to get trains to Port Daniel and Gaspé. We will make sure that everything will rise together. For example, four bridges have to be fixed to reach Port Daniel. Well, they have to be fixed at the same time, not one after the other,” explains Mr. Dubé.

He is under the impression that work will accelerate significantly in 2018. As for reinforcing with big rocks the railway straightening up operation that has been taking

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place in the Chandler area since the end of June, Mr. Dubé points out that decisions will be made soon.

“The Ministry of Transport (officials) will decide who will pay. So far, we have paid for the initial part of the work. We are no longer receiving grants for operational purposes. We are profitable because of the windmill blade trains. We might decide to pay protection work there with our profits,” he adds.

The Gaspésie Railway Society, an entity founded by the municipalities located along the railway, owned the Matapédia-Gaspé line until experiencing financial difficulties in November 2014. After Transports Québec acquired the line in March 2015, the Gaspésie Railway Society remained the

operator.

The second meeting of the railway monitoring committee is not scheduled yet but all the parties have agreed to meet again before Labour Day, at the end of August or the beginning of September.

Meanwhile, the management of the Gaspésie Railway Society will assess over the next weeks the cost of bringing the Amiral tourist train back to New Richmond. The train is blocked in Gaspé since the summer of 2015.

“I want to see the cost of bringing the locomotive to New Richmond, whole or in a certain number of parts. We need it for our operations. We will also bring the passenger cars. We will not sell them. We might find opportunities to run them around here, while waiting for the return of the train to Gaspé,” says Mr. Dubé.