

Gaspésie Railway Society satisfied by progress

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: – Luc Lévesque, director general of the Gaspésie Railway Society, expresses satisfaction following the August 30 meeting of the coordination committee put up in May after the announcement by Quebec premier Philippe Couillard that the Matapédia-Gaspé railway would be repaired over its whole length.

Premier Couillard had also announced a budgetary envelope of \$100 million on May 5th. However, he had not specified a time frame and was stating that it would take many years, maybe even ten, before getting the service back to Gaspé. That side of the announcement had left the management of the Gaspésie Railway Society and the users worried, as important transportation contracts are at stake.

“We had a very good meeting, from the customers, from the elected people that attended the (August 30) meeting and from the Gaspésie Railway Society’s viewpoint. We feel a real will from Transports Québec to do everything that is necessary to accelerate the work and meet the objectives of the customers. I feel that this is the right time,” comments Luc Lévesque.

The first meeting of that



Photo: G. Gagné

Windmill blade trains could be loaded in Gaspé instead of New Richmond in 2020, believes Luc Lévesque, director general of the Gaspésie Railway Society.

coordination committee had been held at the end of July, almost three months after Premier Couillard’s announcement and took place following considerable pressure from the customers and the Gaspésie Railway Society, who seemed to have problems convincing some representatives of Transports Québec that time was a factor.

Luc Lévesque feels that the urgency expressed by the customers and his company fi-

nally paid off.

“It looks as if our message was heard and used by the assistant deputy minister in charge of our file. It seems to reach everybody involved in our file at Transports Québec, from top to bottom. There is now a will to prioritize our project. I explained during the meeting what we could do to accelerate the return of the train to Gaspé. I saw a breakthrough. They (the authorities) are in solution mode,” adds

Mr. Lévesque.

One of the turning points of the August 30 meeting was the acceptance by the Transport Québec management that the repairs of the Caplan-Gaspé stretch can be made simultaneously instead of according to the west to east approach, or step by step, like the department officials were arguing at the July meeting.

“Several bridges can be repaired at the same time along the line. The assistant deputy

minister agreed on that point and stated that the Caplan to Gaspé stretch must be undertaken as a whole,” reports Luc Lévesque.

In May, Josée Hallée, then in charge of Transports Québec’s railway and maritime division, and a big supporter of the step-by-step approach, was declaring that many studies had to be undertaken in order to assess the state of the bridges between Caplan and Gaspé, a process that would require a lot of time, she was saying. She retired from Transport Québec in June.

Luc Lévesque points out that many studies have been realized regarding the bridges located between Caplan and Gaspé.

“The mandate now consists of updating all the information gathered during previous studies, updating the description of the work to do and updating the cost of carrying out that work. The priorities are now aligned on the needs. Transporting windmill blades between Gaspé and New Richmond requires a low bearing capacity, considering that a car carrying a blade weighs one third of a car loaded with lumber. The principle of opening the line to Gaspé for that traffic is accepted, and so is

Cont'd on page 10

RAILWAY PROGRESS:

▶ **Cont'd from page 5**

the principle of increasing that bearing capacity soon after for other needs,” he says.

Transport Québec put the Caplan to Gaspé stretch in a dormant state in March 2015, upon deciding to acquire the line from the Gaspésie Railway Society, which was undergoing financial difficulties at the time. The Gaspésie Railway Society remained the operator of the line section that remains active, the Matapédia to Caplan stretch.

The partial closure of the line forces the Gaspésie Railway Society to load in New Richmond windmill blades that are made in Gaspé by LM Windpower, instead of loading them near the plant. The same transshipment obligation is applied to the cement produced in Port Daniel by McInnis Cement. It is brought to New Richmond in trucks, transferred to railcars and then delivered to the final destination.

That practice costs more to

the customers of LM Windpower and McInnis Cement and heavily cuts the revenues of the Gaspésie Railway Society. That is not counting the wear and tear imposed on the road network and traffic slowdowns.

Hauling cement between Port Daniel and Matapédia will require a much higher bearing capacity than blades, and the repairs expected to take place between Caplan and Port Daniel will take that factor into account.

Luc Lévesque is also anxious to use the New Carlisle yard, a factor that would free some space in New Richmond, where the available tracks are cramped when 72 long cars used to carry windmill blades are loaded and shunted there.

“It took us close to three hours to get five cars loaded with cement last week because of the shunting stemming from the presence of a windmill blade train. Besides, we have other transshipment projects

for New Richmond,” he points out.

Other enterprises based in the town of Gaspé are expected to use the freight train to send out their output. For now, those companies are not expressing their needs publicly but they will need a high bearing capacity because what they want to deliver is heavy freight.

“I think that we can be in Gaspé with a train in 2020. We might not be at full capacity between Port Daniel and Gaspé by then but we will be there for the windmill blade trains. We have thorough repairs to carry out on the Port Daniel bridge located in the centre of the village. That might take two years to complete. We need environmental authorizations because there is a salmon river there,” says Mr. Lévesque.

Quebec’s Department of Transport has created a new railway rehabilitation division, put up specifically for the Gaspé Peninsula railway.