

Government's plan for the railway could be \$50 million for five years

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: — Quebec's Transport Minister Laurent Lessard indicated, during the review of transport credits, that for months his government has been considering an investment of \$50 million over five years for the Gaspé Peninsula railroad.

That time frame is dubbed enormous by several Gaspesian elected officials, considering the necessity of upgrading the Matapédia-Gaspé railway.

The urgency comes from transport requests east of Caplan, where the line was put in a dormant state by the same Quebec government in 2015. Those requests, heavily based on the activities of LM Windpower in Gaspé and McInnis Cement in Port Daniel, could multiply by five the current number of carloads over the next three years. (That number was 1,741 carloads in 2016.)

The amount of \$50 million has been mentioned since December. The possible time frame attached to it was raised for the first time on April 25 by Minister Lessard.

"We have an envelope of \$50 million to invest over the next five years. For the moment, there is no consensus on it," he said. He also added, similar to what Regional Minister Sébastien Proulx had previously said, that several conversations held with stakeholders including McInnis Cement and LM Windpower had delayed the announcement."

Parti Québécois Member of National Assembly for the riding of Gaspé, Gaétan Lelièvre, who had asked the review of credits question that led to Laurent Lessard's "\$50 million over five years" answer, can hardly believe the amount and the time frame, especially in the context that the Quebec government has not invested anything in the Gaspé Peninsula railway infrastructure in three years, and considering that it is the owner of the line since the spring of 2015.

"It is insufficient and miserable. There is an urgent economic need for LM Windpower and McInnis Cement, two companies that have developed temporary solutions because the railway is not repaired from Gaspé to Port Daniel. Those solutions are far from optimal. They hamper the competitiveness of those companies. Moreover, the government fails in the dual role of contributing to and accompa-



Photo: G. Gagné

GE, the buyer of the blades produced by LM Windpower's plant in Gaspé, pays significantly more to have them trucked to New Richmond where they are transferred to railcars. Transportation costs would be significantly reduced if the blades could be loaded in Gaspé. They are exported to the United States.

nying the region's economic development, and as the owner of the line," notes Mr. Lelièvre.

He emphasizes that the "missing consensus" referred to by Minister Lessard is in fact a real consensus, established months and months ago regionally and nationally with the Federation of Chambers of Commerce, Manufacturers and Exporters of Quebec and the Employers' Council.

He concedes that the regional consensus has weakened a bit over the last two weeks, "a factor stemming from the waiting time imposed by the government."

Mr. Lelièvre didn't appreciate a written note sent by the Table of prefects to his and Bonaventure riding Member of the National Assembly Sylvain Roy's attention asking them to refrain from doing any public intervention in regards to the railway before the May 6 visit of Quebec's Premier, Philippe Couillard, in Chandler. The premier could announce something about the railway on that occasion.

"It was either awkward, a lack of judgement or experience but if the president of the Table of prefects (Guy Gallant) had not expressed his intention of running at the Liberal Party convention in Bonaventure, we would not wonder if he is prioritizing the region or if he is protecting the political party," says Mr. Lelièvre.

Prefect Gallant takes the blame for "a communication error." He adds that he is not satisfied with the government's position when it comes to the railway.

"It takes an announcement. It is so long! We wouldn't be

talking about the consensus issue if an announcement had taken place two months ago," he says.

He adds that he hasn't had success in getting information from that government in the last three months, despite numerous attempts. "I also asked the government to inform us (elected officials) before any announcements. We want to be involved in the decision regarding how the money will be invested."

As for the "\$50 million over five years" referred to by Laurent Lessard, Guy Gallant points out that it doesn't match at all with the recent resolution adopted by the Table of prefects, to the effect that "the government must spend its \$50 million in the short term, like a year, and it must establish a three year time frame in order to reach the town of Gaspé."

Gaétan Lelièvre considers that such a scenario "lowers the bar too much. Reaching Gaspé and Port Daniel is more urgent than a three-year time frame."

During the review of transport credits, Laurent Lessard also stated that repairing the line between Matapédia and Gaspé "will cost more than \$100 million." He didn't provide any source for that statement.

Two studies were carried out in 2014 to assess the repairs of the Matapédia-Gaspé line, one by AECOM, whose evaluation situates the cost at \$122 million and one by Canarail, whose assessment is \$86 million. The Canarail personnel made more contacts with the Gaspé Peninsula rail stakeholders than the AECOM staff.