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Commentary

Gilles Gagné

It is time to move in the railway file

The May 5, \$100 million announcement for the betterment of the Matapédia-Gaspé railway made by Quebec's Premier Philippe Couillard is proof that common sense, when it is explained with conviction, and even stubbornness sometimes, can be valuable.

The whole file made sense economically, because about 1,000 jobs are at stake, and social sense, because the Gaspé Peninsula population is deprived of a fair passenger train service, considering exorbitant plane fares and uncertain future for the bus link.

Despite the reassuring words of Premier Couillard, a lot of work remains to be done before we see the resumption of a full freight and passenger service on the Gaspé Peninsula line.

Premier Couillard, by extension, is in part responsible for the bad situation because of the incompetent Ministers of Transport he appointed since the election of the current government in April 2014.

We basically lost three years of repair work, of potential economic growth and of transport efficiency during that stretch.

When former Transport Minister Robert Poëti put the Caplan to Percé line in a dormant state in March

2015, and added the same status to the Percé-Gaspé stretch six months later, he heavily jeopardized the economic future of the Gaspé Peninsula.

A highly incompetent Transport Minister, Mr. Poëti, who was also minister responsible for the Montreal area, didn't believe in the future of the line in the first place. In order to save the appearances, he declared that his department would fix the railway when the number of customers would make it worth the hassle. He also suggested many mayors of the eastern section of the line have considered turning the line into a cycling path, a highly irresponsible idea.

During his 21-month reign at Transport Quebec, Robert Poëti tried to demonstrate how costly repairing the Gaspé Peninsula railway would be. His successor, another highly incompetent Transport Minister, in fact a man who should never have become a statesman, Jacques Daoust, acted as if he wanted to beat Mr. Poëti's ineptitude.

The best example of his bad faith occurred in March 2016, when he said in a parliamentary commission that repairing the Gaspé-Percé stretch of line would cost \$32 million, data that didn't appear in any study taking into account the line's needs.

Those ministers were that inefficient in part because they were informed by irresponsible Transports Québec civil servants. They are not all irresponsible, but it doesn't take many to stop the system, or slow it down. That is what happened with more emphasis since the property of the line was transferred to that ministry in May 2015.

Unfortunately, a certain number of those civil servants didn't want the increased responsibilities coming with 325 kilometres of tracks. In addition to that

factor, they probably didn't believe in the viability and usefulness of the line. Chances are that they didn't care in the first place too.

They are the people who fed Philippe Couillard with the information he announced on May 5. The lack of time frame is greatly attributable to the "experts" of Quebec's Department of Transport. They have been saying for two years that the line was not worth repairing east of Caplan. It would have been difficult to tell the premier that after all, they were wrong all that time. Mr. Couillard himself could hardly admit that the government had been misled for years by a ministry already involved in so many controversies.

However, it is a testimony to Transport Québec's inefficiency that the Gaspé Peninsula railway file was recuperated and dealt with by the premier's office.

Truth be told, if there is some good faith shown by the civil servants and the politicians, there is a formidable window of opportunity stemming from the premier's announcement.

It is unfortunate that the line is currently closed east of Caplan, but at the same time, it is an opportunity. If the money is really available, why not start repair work as soon as possible between Caplan and Gaspé?

There is work to do on only four bridges, one in Caplan, one in Saint-Siméon and two in Port Daniel, and we are not talking about rebuilding, in order to reach McInnis Cement in Port Daniel.

It is a bit more complicated east of Port Daniel, not because of the complexity of the jobs, but because of the number. So why not start now, while working crews are not disturbed by passing trains?