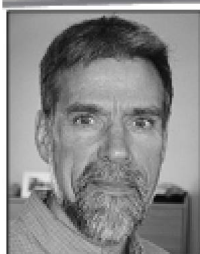


Editorial page



Commentary

Gilles Gagné

One-sided progress, still waiting for action from Québec government

Between December 20 and January 4, Gaspésians and their Christmas break visitors will take a bus in order to reach a Via Rail passenger train, or board the same bus when they get off the train in Campbellton, New Brunswick, because since the spring of 2014, no significant repairs have been carried out in order to bring back the service which was suspended in September 2013.

Over the next few days, trucks will be used to transport parts of the Gaspésie Railway Society Locomotive 1849. The engine was used in 2013 and 2014 to pull the Amiral tourist train. Since no significant repairs were carried out between 2014 and 2017 over the Caplan to Gaspé track. This section was put in a dormant state in March 2015 by one of the most incompetent ministers of Transport in Quebec's history, Robert Poëti.

The Gaspésie Railway Society management is looking at innovative ways to use the Caplan to Gaspé stretch or more precisely the New Richmond to Gaspé section. Over the summer the management submitted a proposal to Transport Québec to resume freight traffic as far as Gaspé and as soon as possible, suggesting to use trucks to pull flat cars loaded with windmill blades made by LM Wind Power. Trucks made by a company called Brandt are designed to pull railway cars. Since they weigh only one-third of the Gaspésie Railway Society's relatively light locomotives, freight traffic could and should resume way before the Caplan-Gaspé line is upgraded enough to ac-

commodate conventional trains.

So, due to the Quebec government's negligence, slowness, incompetence, carelessness and ignorance, the region's railway company is forced to find solutions that are not even seen in some Third World countries in order to increase transportation efficiency. The creativity of the company's management must also be geared towards gently putting some pressure on our Quebec decision-makers, instead of concentrating essentially on maximizing the opportunities offered by rail transportation.

When Premier Philippe Couillard visited on May 5 to announce that \$100 million had been earmarked for the Matapédia to Gaspé line, nobody really thought that things would happen quickly.

After all, the Premier's staff had removed the file from the ministry in charge of it, Quebec's department of Transport, and shoved down civil servants' throats a sum of money and a target they didn't want. Most of Transport Québec civil servants didn't want the east end of the track to be put back in service at all, and had a difficult time believing that more than \$50 million would come our way for the Matapédia-Caplan line.

The strength of the Gaspesian economy proved them wrong. The train is needed for LM Wind Power to efficiently transport, at the lowest cost possible, its windmill blades made at its Gaspé plant. McInnis Cement needs the railway more than expected to transport its cement from Port Daniel to several of its North American customers.

This shouldn't come as a surprise for the Quebec government and its ministries, as much of the funding necessary to build the Port Daniel cement plant came from public corporations like Investissement-Québec and the Caisse de dépôt et de placement. The announcements regarding the building of the cement plant were made on January 2014 by the former government of Pauline

Marois, and again in June of the same year by the new government of Philippe Couillard.

It is a typical case of the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing. If a government encourages such a project, it should be normal to see the departments of that same government ensuring a means of transportation is able to run smoothly around it, right? Wrong in this case!

That government praises itself with its move of "saving" the Gaspé Peninsula railway in March 2015, considering that the former owner, the Gaspésie Railway Society, was experiencing financial difficulties.

The following moves of that government consisted in allotting modest amounts of money to ensure that the Gaspésie Railway Society would keep operating freight trains between Matapédia and Caplan and carry out maintenance duties.

It is true that a couple of decisions made by the Gaspésie Railway Society, mainly the use of a saline solution as a defoliant in 2013, didn't help. However, the management has since changed and the last three years have been successful. McInnis Cement didn't help either through by waiting until 2015 before admitting that rail transportation would be very useful to the cement plant.

More than six-and-a-half months after the \$100 million announcement made by Premier Couillard, not one penny of that amount has been spent or even ear-marked for a specific project. Consequently, one more summer has been lost for the realization of repairs between Caplan and Gaspé, with no sign in sight of any breakthrough.

The office of Philippe Couillard should have known in May that political involvement was necessary to impose track repairs to a department of Transport lacking sufficient supervision capacity and frustrated by an imposed \$100 million investment. It is never too late to make it right. That government must accelerate upgrades to the Gaspé Peninsula railway and it must start now.