

Regional minister Sébastien Proulx not ready to make announcement about the railway

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CHANDLER: – The Quebec government will definitely need more time to reflect on the form the betterment of the Gaspesian railway will take, explains Education Minister Sébastien Proulx, who is also in charge of the Gaspé Peninsula and Magdalen Islands.

Minister Proulx was in Chandler, Percé and Gaspé on January 12 and 13 to meet with regional stakeholders and discuss various aspects of the area's affairs, like coastal erosion and the state of the Matapédia-Gaspé rail line.

He confirmed that his government planned to announce the upgrading of the line only between Matapédia and New Carlisle before Christmas, a situation that would not take into consideration the fact that a lot of freight traffic is and will be generated east of New Carlisle, mainly in Gaspé and Port Daniel.

"We had received petitions with 4,000 names, or even 5,000 names. There was a motion submitted to the National Assembly. We were ready to make an announcement. However, in light of new elements, the needs of the cement plant and the company we are visiting tomorrow (LM Wind Power), there is consensus to use the railway over its whole length, that it would be more viable. It leads to two things: there is no announcement for the railway now and the department (of Transport) must re-analyse the situation," says Minister Proulx.

"I don't know what the delay will be for those analyses. I will evidently conduct follow-ups with the department of Transport, but as I explained a little while ago to the prefects, given the new consensus, and considering the different nature of the investment required over the whole line instead of a (smaller) portion for passenger and freight services, it requires different work from

the Transport department," added Minister Proulx.

The line is active between Matapédia and Caplan, but was put in a dormant state between Caplan and Gaspé in 2015 by Transport-Québec. All the new freight hauling requests sent to the operator of the line, the Gaspésie Railway Society, originate from the dormant stretch. The transporter must make thorough adjustments to have that freight trucked to New Richmond, where it is transferred to rail cars.

Windmill blades have taken that path since November, and cement produced by McInnis Cement in Port Daniel will also take that route, starting in March or April. The Saint-Elzéar sawmill is also looking to load lumber in New Richmond. However, the ideal loading place for that industry would be New Carlisle. All the trans-shipments made in New Richmond by LM Wind Power, McInnis Cement and the Association cooperative forestière de Saint-Elzéar represent or will represent added costs for the shippers and clients, thus affecting their competitiveness.

Sébastien Proulx points out that the damage caused to the railway by the December 30 storm complicates the assessment of line repairs.

"There are spots that are not available even with a nacelle. We are dealing with access problems due to ice and snow conditions," he added.

However, Luc Lévesque, director general of the Gaspésie Railway Society, made an assessment of the work required to repair the line where the December 30 storm hit and he states that \$800,000 to \$900,000 would be enough to put the rails back in place and restore the rock dykes needed to protect those stretches.

Minister Proulx was asked if the Quebec government would ask the federal government for funds in order to finance part of the line upgrading

between Matapédia and Gaspé, as \$86 million are needed to put the line back in shape for at least 25 years, according to the last study carried out to assess that cost.

Jean D'Amour, the minister responsible for the Gaspé Peninsula before Sébastien Proulx, made several remarks to the effect that Ottawa should participate in the line upgrading.

"So far, all the work that was carried out since my nomination (as regional minister) was carried out based on the budget provisions of the (Que-

bec) department of Transport for that line. I don't have any information regarding federal participation on that line. I am not saying that they (talks between the two governments) don't exist but I am not part of them," he pointed out.

The Quebec government has made very few interventions on the line between Matapédia and Gaspé since the April 2014 election. Transport-Québec paid \$3.9 million to buy the line May 2015 when the Gaspésie Railway Society experienced financial difficulties. Since then, all the money

allotted to that transporter has been earmarked for operational and maintenance tasks, while thorough repairs to the line's bridges have been a known fact since 2010. The governments of Jean Charest and Pauline Marois invested money in the bridges in 2012 and 2013.

Under the norms of the Ottawa-Quebec Infrastructure Program, the provincial government must decide where the money will go. It is consequently up to the Quebec government to ask for federal funding support for the Gaspé Peninsula railway.