

## VIA RAIL:

# Trains are full but there won't be an increase in train frequency

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: – Gaspésians, and other train riders, are experiencing a problem trying to reserve a seat or a room on VIA Rail's Ocean train, linking Halifax and Montreal. Since the suspension of the train between Montreal and Gaspé-New Carlisle in September 2013, the Ocean has been the train serving the Gaspé Peninsula, either in Campbellton, New Brunswick, or Matapédia.

However, even though summer is typically a busy period for VIA Rail, sold out trains happened unusually early on the Ocean this year. It has been impossible, or extremely hard, to find a seat or a bed since the end of June. The "sold out" period is usually closer to mid-July.

The distribution of youth passes has played a role in that situation. Another factor seems to be the number of Renaissance passenger cars sidelined for different reasons. That is the main equipment used on the Ocean train.

Between July 11 and July 17, including four-and-a-half business days, The Gaspé SPEC tried to get information from VIA Rail on the Renaissance equipment.

The questions were simple: How many Renaissance cars are currently in service? How many units are under repair? How many Renaissance units are permanently sidelined?

In the documents consulted by SPEC, 139 Renaissance units were bought in 2000 for \$130 million. 106 of them were adapted between 2000 and 2002 for their use in Canada, which required another significant investment.

While waiting for answers from VIA Rail, SPEC asked questions to Tim Hayman, a Transportation spokesperson based in Halifax. Transportation is a commuter transport advocacy group, formerly



Photo: G. Gagné

*VIA Rail currently operates the Ocean train with three locomotives, and at least 18 cars, sometimes more.*

known as Transport 2000.

Mr. Hayman first explains that adding cars to the existing Ocean train is not easy.

"VIA is currently running both sets of Renaissance equipment on the Ocean at their maximum practical length - five coaches, and eight sleepers, in addition to the rest of the required equipment, baggage, service cars, diner and transition car. They also added a stainless steel Chateau sleeper to each train for crew space so they could free up more rooms in the Renaissance sleepers, and they've also sold some surplus space in that car on the sold out trains," he initially commented.

"Even if VIA had more Renaissance equipment available, and I suspect they have at least a few more coaches and sleepers that are serviceable this the moment, I am skeptical that they would add any more to the train. Anything longer than that length runs into operational issues. There is a platform length issue, and

importantly, in Halifax station, any train with more than 18 Renaissance cars starts to have issues fitting in the station track. The Renaissance can't easily be split and recombined, as it takes several hours to do so. Consequently, if they ever need to run extra cars beyond that length, they usually use stainless steel sleepers (Chateau) or even coaches to add on the tail end, since these can be dropped on the second track in Halifax and recombined quickly before departure," adds Mr. Hayman.

A simple solution, adding train frequency, also seems unlikely, analyzes the Transportation expert.

"The only way they could practically add capacity for the Ocean would be to put another full set of Renaissance equipment into service and run additional frequencies, but that is highly unlikely, and that's where you get into the issue with equipment that is not serviceable. Again, I don't have a specific number. No

one I've asked could tell me, but I believe it's not enough to make another full set," says Mr. Hayman, who raised the matter with a representative of VIA Rail.

"VIA could in fact run the Ocean at least four times per week while still only running two sets of equipment, and I think it's an absolute shame that they aren't doing that. However, in a meeting with Susan Williams, VIA's Eastern general manager last year, I raised the four trains a week option and she said she was fully aware of that, and while she wouldn't commit to anything, it sounded like they had that on their radar as a possible option. But I don't know if it will actually happen," says Mr. Hayman.

"Personally, I think they would be better off to run trains that are half the size on a daily basis, rather than these monster trains three times a week. They would very likely carry more people in the long run," he concludes.