

Why isn't our railine a priority?

Gilles Gagné

CARLETON: — Gaspésians eager to witness some kind of development in the railway restoration file will likely need more patience, considering that Sébastien Proulx, the minister responsible for the region, repeated once again on April 4 that improvements on the Matapédia to Gaspé line are “still under analysis”.

During the week prior to April 4, Gaspésians saw that the last Quebec budget made no reference to funding the upgrading of the railway. They had also heard Finance Minister Carlos Leitao say in two radio interviews that the dormant part of the line was “not an existential stake”.

On March 4, Minister Proulx repeated what he had been saying since December, that is to say that the “region’s priorities have changed” that the railway file “is dealt with by the department of Transport” and that he consequently has no control “over the decisions pertaining to the priorities, funding amounts and the time frame.”

Sébastien Proulx also repeated, “I was ready to announce the return of the passenger train down to Caplan in December.”

When he was told by journalists that there is no facility to turn a passenger train in Caplan, he added that “by mentioning Caplan, I meant New Carlisle. Once the line is upgraded to Caplan, it will be possible to get to New Carlisle”. He was obviously ignoring that work is required on the Ruisseau-Leblanc bridge between Caplan and Saint-Siméon.

Minister Proulx also indicated that “they (elected people of the region) said to abandon the passenger (train), which forced the civil servants to go back to analysis”. When asked to explain what he meant by the abandonment of the passenger train, he corrected his statement somewhat by saying the elected people asked to “delay” the resumption of VIA Rail service.

Mr. Proulx, who is also minister of Education, emphasized that the lack of mention pertaining to the Gaspé railway in the budget doesn’t mean anything, considering that the money could come from Quebec’s Infrastructure program,

However, SPEC consulted the document specific to that infrastructure program and there is no mention of any significant funding earmarked for



Transporting the blades by truck between Gaspé and New Richmond diminishes the competitiveness of the LM Windpower plant in Gaspé.

a railway project. There are only references to studies without a specific venture mention.

The Gaspé Peninsula line is functional over its west third, between Matapédia and Caplan. The last study, carried out by Canarail, stated that \$86 million would be required to upgrade it for the long term over its whole length. The line was acquired by Quebec’s department of Transport during the spring of 2015 following financial difficulties experienced by its former owner, the Gaspésie Railway Society, a body controlled by the munic-

ipalities located between Matapédia and Gaspé.

The stretch of line between Caplan and Gaspé was put in a dormant state just after the Quebec government acquired the railway, in 2015. Then Transport Minister Robert Poëti committed to reopening that stretch in the occurrence of business opportunities.

Business opportunities have appeared since the summer of 2016 and they are all coming from customers needing rail service on the dormant part. This year alone, Gaspé-based LM Windpower will ex-

port 1,000 windmill blades placed on 1,500 flatcars to the United States. It is a multi-year contract.

McInnis Cement will use railcars to ship cement out of the region a few weeks down the road. The first contract in that regard calls for the loading of 300 cars per year. The blades and cement are and will have to be transported by truck to New Richmond because of the dormant state of the line’s biggest stretch.

Millions of dollars of revenues are therefore lost by the Gaspésie Railway Society, the municipal body that owned the railway until running into financial problems. Freight cars generate revenues based on the mileage covered. So loading cars in New Richmond at mile 69 instead of Port Daniel, at mile 124 or Gaspé at mile 202 represents a significant drop in revenues. The customers like General Electric for the blades and McInnis Cement’s clients also pay more when the freight is hauled by truck.

The mayor of Gaspé, Daniel Côté, is stunned to see Minister Proulx once again using the excuse that the mayors and business people have changed the priority that was expressed in November and

December 2016 to postpone any government intervention. That position taken by many Gaspé Peninsula leaders favours the freight train to Gaspé over the passenger train to Caplan in the short term.

“LM Windpower’s announcement regarding windmill blade exports took place eight months ago and that is when the necessity to re-establish the freight service to Gaspé was identified. I find that the minister needs a rather long period of adaptation to change. Facing a closed envelope, reportedly of \$50 million, we expressed a preference for generating more profits, which would be the case if we could load the blades in Gaspé. The freight cars loaded with the blades are light. I do not minimise the passenger train. We want both! Feel free (Minister Proulx) to solve the passenger train issue all the way to Gaspé as well,” says Daniel Côté.

The Gaspésie Railway Society carried 1,624 carloads in 2015 and 1,741 in 2016. The number of carloads will surpass the 3,000 freight cars mark this year and will probably reach between 4,000 and 5,000 cars in 2018. The potential for 2020 could easily reach 9,000 to 10,000 freight cars.