



## Editorial page



### Commentary

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## Did you say acceleration?

After standing still or at most going very slowly for many years, you would think that it's time to accelerate. On August 16 in Port Daniel, the minister responsible for the Gaspé Peninsula, Pierre Moreau, was right when he said that his government is accelerating the measures to upgrade the region's railway.

There is a problem with Mr. Moreau's perception of acceleration. He thinks, or so he says, that his government went from fast to very fast in the railway file. In reality, Philippe Couillard's government has been going incredibly slowly in a file that is resolutely urgent.

A comparison with previous governments is handy here. Under the regimes of Jean Charest and Pauline Marois, \$8.5 million and \$10 million were earmarked yearly for the Matapédia-Gaspé railroad between 2011 and 2013.

If that refurbishment program has been maintained, important work would have been carried out in 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018 and the line would be, at least, operable to Port Daniel.

Instead of that, the Couillard government invested close to nothing in 2014, a few hundred thousands of dollars, barely enough to prevent the Gaspésie Railway Society from going bankrupt. In 2015, they injected \$4 million for the acquisition of the line, depriving the region of one of its major economic development tools.

That acquisition would have been acceptable if the acceleration of the line's upgrading had proceeded, but almost nothing happened. Only \$2.5 million in two years was invested to keep Gaspésie Railway Society in operation.

Also, in 2015, the government put the line east of Caplan in a dormant state. At this time the con-

struction of the Port Daniel cement plant was accelerating. It was evident to everyone involved in the cement industry in North America that a major cement plant needs a functional railway, everyone except government officials.

The situation didn't improve much on Transport Quebec's front in 2016, despite the emergence of the windmill blade traffic, the largest source of revenues for the Gaspésie Railway Society. Nobody clued in about the fact that sending five or six vehicles with each blade from Gaspé and the transshipment location in New Richmond didn't make much sense.

In 2017, despite the start of McInnis Cement's commercial production, and despite a May 5 \$100 million announcement by Mr. Couillard for the full refurbishment of the Matapédia-Gaspé line, hardly anything moved on the infrastructure front, except the \$900,000 replacement of the Mile 9 Ristigouche South East bridge.

Despite last year's major announcement by Premier Couillard, hardly any advancements were made for the fifth straight year. Not a single bridge will be replaced or repaired this year, despite needs that have been identified in the numerous studies carried out over the last decade regarding the line.

Minister Moreau, similar to his predecessors responsible for the region, including Jean D'amour and Sébastien Proulx, has started looking for excuses to explain Transport Quebec's inability to repair the line. It is a line located along the water, prone to erosion, and safety must come first. We consequently need more studies, he says.

That crap is for losers. The Paspebiac to Gaspé portion of the line was built between 1902 and 1911 with men, women, shovels, spades, a few steam-propelled excavators and dynamite. The means have improved immensely more than a century later.

If we listen to Pierre Moreau, it sounds as if repairing bridges made of steel and wood is more complicated than nuclear physics. Someone should remind him that we sent a man to the moon 49 years ago.

On August 4, 2008, the Stewart River bridge in Saint-Omer collapsed after being hit by debris coming down the river which was inflated by more than 100 millimetres of rain in 30 hours. The main spans

of the bridge were only held together by the two rails. Without the rails, those sections would have gone down and would have fell into the Baie des Chaleurs. The bridge was rebuilt and reopened in less than 35 days. There was a real willingness to get the line back in service. In 2008, there was still passenger service but the freight traffic was less than 15% of what it is now.

The idleness of Transport Quebec and the politicians stems from their lack of comprehension of the region's priorities or maybe it is just carelessness. In 2014, the civil servants involved probably believed that there was no future for the line and now today, in 2018, it is difficult to change that perception.

Pierre Moreau's situation is different. He cannot admit at the beginning of an electoral campaign that civil servants and politicians failed in the railway file, however, it would be more suitable to admit such miscalculation than to think that Gaspeians are foolish enough to believe the silly excuses that have been thrown at us for years now in the railway file.