

Gaspé mayor urges provincial government to make significant headway in the railway file

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: – The mayor of Gaspé, Daniel Côté, is getting seriously impatient about how slow the provincial government is at starting the refurbishment of the Matapédia to Gaspé railway, especially the section between Cascapédia-St-Jules and his town.

Mr. Côté commented on the situation on May 9, a year and four days after the \$100 million announcement made in New Carlisle by Premier Philippe Couillard, who committed to use that money to upgrade the Gaspé Peninsula railroad over its entire length.

No significant work has been carried out on the line since that announcement. Only normal maintenance work like tie replacement and ballast spreading has been done over the year; and that has been funded by another budgetary envelope.

“It is starting to be worrisome. The problem is that the railway file has been placed in the administrative shackles of the *Bureau des grands projets*,” says Mr. Côté, referring to the office managing Quebec’s major infrastructure projects.

“The only reassuring aspect here is that the money is earmarked but the procedure is endless. In that process, an opportunity study and a business plan have to be made before drawing the plans and specifications,” he adds.

Daniel Côté wonders why an opportunity study is necessary in order to determine the relevance of bringing the train back to Port Daniel and Gaspé while the output value of the LM Wind Power and McInnis Cement plants reaches hundreds of millions of dollars yearly.

“LM Wind Power supplies 500 jobs in Gaspé and has the potential to create 300 more because they are filling tenders for more contracts (...) The potential is enormous because the line is in a dormant state in Gaspé. We are at risk of being less competitive. It should be completed by 2020 but at the current pace, we will have it in 2060 or 2070! The civil servants are slowing down the file because they were not expecting the \$100 million announcement and the politicians believe what the civil servants are saying,” affirms Mayor



Photo: G. Gagné

LM Wind Power’s blades are all exported to the southern part of the United States by train but loading them on flat cars near the Gaspé plant instead of New Richmond would allow the manufacturer and its customers to save about \$7 million yearly in transportation costs.

Côté.

“If the government was really serious about the will to respect the commitment made by Philippe Couillard, a mandate would be given to the Treasury Board, the body that can skip steps like an opportunity study. We can gather with a pen and a piece of paper on the corner of a table but that it is a useless step,” he emphasizes.

Two hours after Daniel Côté’s criticism of the government’s inaction, another National Assembly intervention was made by the Gaspé riding representative, Gaétan Lelièvre. He has asked questions about the Gaspé Peninsula railway on April 11, twice on April 25 and again on April 26. On May 1, Mr. Lelièvre met with Transport Minister André Fortin and was not able to get an answer on a schedule for the upgrading work.

Since the beginning of April, Mr. Lelièvre, an independent Member of the National Assembly (MNA), has insisted on getting such a schedule, considering that the government has had a year to plan the work.

All the ministers that have replied to him during those question periods have eluded

the schedule issue.

On May 9, Pierre Moreau, who is the minister responsible for the Gaspé Peninsula, told Gaétan Lelièvre that the Gaspé Peninsula line “is a complicated infrastructure upon which we are working. The government commitment is a firm one.”

Minutes later, Transport Minister André Fortin also ignored any reference to the time factor expressed by Mr. Lelièvre, and insisted on the “30,000 railroad ties replaced,” over the last two years and that “tens of thousands of ties” will also be replaced in the year to come.

On the complexity issue raised by Minister Moreau, Gaétan Lelièvre stated that the Gaspé Peninsula railroad has been existing for 100 years.

Like he had done in April, the Gaspé riding MNA also used the REM example, the *Réseau express métropolitain*, the light train commuter planned for Montreal.

“How can you explain that you announced a \$6.3 billion project to be realized in three years while in the Gaspé Peninsula, the job consists of repairing a line with \$100 million?” asked Mr. Lelièvre. His question was not an-

swered by the ministers.

Quebec’s Department of Transport bought the Gaspé

Peninsula line in March 2015 because the Gaspésie Railway Society, a municipal body that had owned it since 2007, no longer had the financial resources to maintain it. The Gaspésie Railway Society has remained the train operator since 2015.

Transport Quebec put almost two-thirds of the line in a dormant state in 2015, however, the Gaspésie Railway Society has seen its traffic more than double since hauling 1,624 carloads in 2015. All the growth comes from customers located along the dormant stretch, namely LM Wind Power and McInnis Cement.

Sending windmill blades and cement by truck to the transshipment location in New Richmond increases transportation costs significantly for the two companies and their customers.