

Gaspésie Railway Society experienced a banner year in 2017

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: – The Gaspésie Railway Society experienced a record year in 2017, increasing its traffic by more than 1,000 carloads over 2016. The number of carloads increased to 2,786 carloads last year, which is 1,045 more than the 1,741 carloads of 2016. It is a 60% hike.

Two factors explain that sizable increase, the rise of windmill blade traffic and the emergence of cement hauling. Approximately 1,150 flatcars carrying 770 blades travelled between New Richmond and Matapédia last year, compared to 72 in 2016, the result in that latter case of a trial run.

As for the cement traffic, it started in July and led to the hauling of 111 cars before the end of the year, a good start considering that the Port Daniel plant was still producing at a low rate during the first months of production.

The leader in carloads, the Temrex sawmill in Nouvelle, had an average year with just under 1,500 cars of lumber and woodchips. The woodchip traffic went down a bit.

Gaspésie Railway Society director general Luc Lévesque is confident that windmill blades and cement traffic will rise in 2018, maybe enough to allow the Gaspésie Railway Society to reach a total of 4,000 carloads.

“We hauled cement with a



Photo: G. Gagné

The hauling of windmill blades on the railway led to a significant increase in traffic between New Richmond and Matapédia.

pool of 25 cars until December. We just received 35 additional cars. New McInnis Cement customers are served by the railway and we are benefitting from that. I wouldn't be surprised if we reached close to 1,000 carloads of cement traffic in 2018,” explains Mr. Lévesque.

The gain will not be as significant when it comes to windmill blades, considering the huge increase in 2017. “The beginning of the year will be stronger this year though. We expect two windmill blade trains in January, one in February and two in

March, compared to two trains last year for the same three months,” says Mr. Lévesque.

Each such train consists of 72 flat cars. A target of 1,400 windmill blade cars in 2018 is within reach. It could even be higher. The annual capacity of the LM Wind Power blade manufacturing plant in Gaspé now reaches close to 1,100 blades. Considering that the whole production, or very close, is exported by rail to the southern part of the United States and that three cars are needed for two blades, the number of flat cars could hover around

1,500 and 1,600.

Since the track between Caplan and Gaspé was put in a dormant state in March 2015 by its then new owner, Quebec's department of Transport, and considering that no work has been carried out since on that section despite the fact that this stretch presents the highest growth potential for the Gaspésie Railway Society, windmill blades and cement have to be trucked to New Richmond, where they are transferred to railcars.

That trans-shipment has a significant impact on the production cost of LM Wind

Power and McInnis Cement. Hauling windmill blades by truck between Gaspé and New Richmond costs between \$600 and \$700 per unit, so the additional cost for LM Wind Power and its customers amounts to close to \$7 million yearly.

Trucking cement between Port Daniel and New Richmond also costs significantly more than the tab that would be linked to loading cement at the plant. The railway passes by that plant.

“Other customers will be added as soon as we offer the service to Gaspé,” points out Luc Lévesque, without mentioning them. He specifies that thousands of carloads could then be added to the Gaspésie Railway Society annual traffic.

The addition of the Association coopérative forestière of Saint-Elzéar's sawmill among the Gaspésie Railway Society clients is expected soon. Lumber will be loaded in New Richmond as long as the line is closed east of Caplan.

The Gaspésie Railway Society is an entity controlled by the Avignon, Bonaventure, Percé Rock and Côte-de-Gaspé MRCs. The company owned the railway between 2007 and 2015, until a debt of \$4 million forced it to file for the protection of the tribunal. Transport Québec then took control of the line but the Gaspésie Railway Society remains the transporter along the line.