

Gaspésie Railway Society gets a more definitive time frame

Gilles Gagné

NEW CARLISLE: – The management of the Gaspésie Railway Society now has a certain commitment from Transport Quebec that the rebuilding of the two Cascapedia-St-Jules and the refurbishment of other bridges between Caplan and Port Daniel will take place simultaneously.

Following a May 29 meeting of the Gaspé Peninsula railway steering committee, the president of the Gaspésie Railway Society, Éric Dubé, points out that the principle of reaching Port Daniel's cement plant when the two Cascapedia-St-Jules railway bridges are repaired is accepted by the owner of the line, Transport Quebec.

"The idea of rebuilding the Cascapedia-St-Jules bridges is to increase the cement traffic, among other goals. That cement traffic will really increase once we can reach the cement plant in Port Daniel. So repairing the three bridges that pose a problem between Caplan and Port Daniel must be carried out simultaneously and the Transport Quebec people agree with us now," explains Éric Dubé.

He had been advocating for the synchronicity of those rebuilding and repair jobs since at least 2017.

"The big stake now is to convince the Quebec government cabinet to put the Caplan to Port Daniel stretch of railway in the business plan mode, a status that will accelerate the call for tender process. If the National Assembly can adopt a business plan mode motion before June 15, some mandates will be given to make plans and specifications. The call for tenders could be issued during the winter. The contract could be awarded during the spring of 2019," says Mr. Dubé.

"Once the contract is awarded, the general contractor has to order the steel that will be needed to build the bridges. The economy is running full blast. It will take six, eight or ten months before receiving the metal. Then, the installation will take place and the scenario is not decided yet. Will the contractor install the new bridges parallel to the existing bridges or will the old bridges be dismantled before the new structures are mounted as soon as possible? In the latter case, traffic has to be stopped for



Photo: G. Gagné

Cement traffic has contributed to the increase of carloads at the Gaspésie Railway Society but that rise would be much better if cement could be loaded at the Port Daniel plant.

weeks," adds Éric Dubé.

He thinks that the two Cascapedia-St-Jules bridges can hardly be installed and running before the beginning of 2020, and more likely a bit later that year. "We are not there yet," he simply says to express the difficulty of determining a replacement date.

McInnis Cement ships around 25 cars of cement per week. However, that number will reach 40 weekly cars in the early part of the summer. Transport Quebec had determined a limit of 10 cars per week on the Cascapedia-St-Jules bridges in November 2017 and that number was increased to 25 after advice included in a report prepared by consultant Norda Stelo at the end of the winter. (Those bridges were built in the 1890s.)

Due to Transport Quebec's 2015 decision to put in a dormant state the railway east of Caplan, the cement cars cannot be loaded at the Port Daniel plant even if the line

passes between the McInnis Cement facility and its adjacent marine terminal.

That context explains why a transshipment silo was built in New Richmond a year ago. The growing needs of McInnis Cement are even forcing the Gaspésie Railway Society to build a second temporary rail terminal in Nouvelle.

Hence, starting around mid-June, the railcars will receive a partial load of 56 tonnes in New Richmond and 39 additional tonnes in Nouvelle, to make a way around the Cascapedia-St-Jules' bridges' limit of 25 fully loaded cars. This other temporary terminal will allow the Gaspésie Railway Society to stop putting empty cars alternating with loaded cars when the train passes on those bridges.

Éric Dubé also points out that dialogue between the Gaspésie Railway Society and Transport Quebec have led to determining intervention priorities between Matapédia

and Gaspé. An update study on the Caplan to Port Daniel stretch of line has helped in that regard.

"We have identified the critical points on the three sections of the line. On section 1, between Matapédia and Caplan, there is only one critical point, the Cascapedia-St-Jules bridges. Between Caplan and Port Daniel, there are three, the Ruisselet wooden bridge in Caplan, and the two Port Daniel bridges, one just west of the station and the big bridge near the fishing wharf. We don't know yet if the Ruisselet bridge needs to be replaced. The Port Daniel

bridges don't have to be replaced but the bigger one needs thorough work. It can be done within a year though," says Mr. Dubé.

Section 3, between Port Daniel and Gaspé, contains seven critical points, mostly bridges, and the landslide between Port Daniel and Gaspé.

"Most of the work on the big bridges was made in 2013 on that section. We have asked Transports Québec to analyse the amount of work required if we resume the service by hauling windmill blades only. The blades are very light. We are waiting on their answer regarding that point," explains Éric Dubé, who doesn't think that traffic can resume in Gaspé before 2022.

The Gaspésie Railway Society used to be the line owner but lost it in 2015 due to financial difficulties. The company, owned by the municipalities located between Matapédia and Gaspé, remained the line operator.

Freight traffic has almost doubled on the line since 2015. It went from 1,624 carloads that year to 2,786 in 2017. It will near 4,000 cars in 2018. The addition of windmill blades and cement traffic explain the situation.