

No set date for the return of VIA Rail

VIA Rail president affirms goal of restoring train service

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND — The president of VIA Rail Canada, Yves Desjardins-Siciliano, prefers not to make a prediction regarding the return of the passenger train between Matapédia and Gaspé, although he wants it to return.

The service has been suspended since September 2013 between Matapédia and New Carlisle, mainly due to the state of some bridges. The

service between New Carlisle and Chandler was suspended in December 2011 because some repairs were needed on a bridge located in Chandler.

That bridge was repaired but its completion occurred after the suspension of the easterly stretch of the VIA Rail service. Since then, the portion of line between Caplan and Gaspé was put on hold by Quebec's Department of Transport, after its acquisition of the Matapédia to Gaspé

line in 2015.

Mr. Desjardins-Siciliano points out that safety concerns determined in 2013 still exist on the Gaspé Peninsula line.

"I don't have a date in mind (for the return of the service) because I don't have a date of conclusion for the work of the infrastructure and I have no idea about the quality of the infrastructure at the present time. The infrastructure must be maintained and when it is not maintained, its

deterioration accelerates," explains the president of VIA Rail.

The Caplan to Gaspé stretch, has not been maintained since the acquisition of the line by Transports Québec. It has only been inspected regularly. Former Quebec premier Philippe Couillard announced \$100 million for the refurbishment of the Gaspesian line in May 2017 but the money has mostly been spent on studies until

very recently.

The time elapsed since 2013 has not altered Yves Desjardins-Siciliano's intent to resume the service between Matapédia and Gaspé. It is in fact included in the law that led to the creation of the public transporter.

"VIA Rail will come back once the line is open and safe to Gaspé," he first says. When asked if an approach by steps

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could be considered, once the line is repaired between Matapédia and New Carlisle, he expresses an open mind.

"Our intent is to serve the Gaspé Peninsula, would it only be because it is an excellent line, scenery-wise. However, the infrastructure must be safe. If it can be safe on a portion of the line, we will see (if a comeback by steps can be considered) once we reach that point. We are far from that," he says.

The necessity to reach Gaspé rests on the fact that in order to maximize its revenues, VIA Rail must serve the region's biggest market. Safety and a reasonable speed for the passenger train remains important conditions, he told the SPEC.

In 2011, the Montreal-Gaspé train carried 27,991 passengers, so very close to 28,000 people, which is more than the two other regional



Photo: G. Gagné

VIA Rail president Yves Desjardins-Siciliano says that the railway must be repaired as far as the end of the line, Gaspé, in order to envision a return of the passenger train east of Matapédia. A return to New Carlisle is possible only if repairs between that point and Gaspé are underway and guaranteed.

trains of VIA Rail in Quebec put together, the Abitibi and the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean trains.

Since the suspension of the

service in 2013, a lot of Gaspésians still use VIA Rail's services by boarding the Ocean train, mainly in Campbellton or in Matapédia.