

## Provincial government makes railway announcement

Gilles Gagné

PORT DANIEL: – The minister responsible for the Gaspé Peninsula, Pierre Moreau, mixed a lot of old news and a bit of new information on August 16 when he announced a grant of \$12.5 million over five years for the operations of the Gaspésie Railway Society, a measure included in the March 27 budget, and a sum of \$15.5 million for studies and repairs on the Matapedia-Gaspé line.

The \$15.5 million was old news since it was taken from the \$100 million announced on May 5, 2017 by Quebec Premier, Philippe Couillard, in New Carlisle. However, the new aspect of it is that the amount is the first significant sum taken from that envelope in 16 months.

A few days away from the official launch of the campaign, Minister Moreau refrained from admitting that the announcement contained a heavy electoral element. “The government is moving forward, election or not,” he said.

He indicated that the Matapedia to Gaspé line will benefit from an “acceleration of repairs,” over the coming years, because of the emergence of two companies, McInnis Cement in Port Daniel and Gaspé’s LM Wind Power.

Not impressed by the word acceleration, Cynthia Patterson, of Rural Dignity, who has been defending rail services in the Gaspé Peninsula for 33 years, talked to Minister Moreau after his presentation, underlining that she was “disappointed that there was not more on the passenger train. We have been waiting for years. (...) Don’t leave it to half a sentence!”

She reminded him that the region’s population needs the train because of the distance factor. Aging people cannot drive over long distances and sometimes are not able to drive at all.

Minister Moreau replied that the passage of passenger trains on a line requires a higher degree of maintenance because they go faster. He added that the “the safety of the passengers must come first and foremost,” and that “more studies are required on some parts of the line before we proceed with work. (...) Once those infrastructures will be upgraded or changed, the (passenger train) service will come back.”



Photo: G. Gélinas

*Cynthia Patterson has been defending rail services on the Coast for 33 years.*

Acknowledging the importance of freight traffic, Cynthia Patterson was also quick to reply that the intense truck traffic is an important safety issue for Gaspésians. “We desperately need those blades off the road.”

She also reminded Mr. Moreau that “the whole context of public transportation in the Gaspé Peninsula is disastrous and disgraceful,” mentioning the cuts in the bus service and the huge air travel fares. “How do you get out of here?”

Minister Moreau stressed that a summit on air travel was organized by his government

in order to reduce those fares. “We understand very well that there is a public transportation issue.”

After the exchange, when interviewed by SPEC, Cynthia Patterson pointed out that the Quebec government has been “big on talk and short on action in the railway file. They could have worked to upgrade the line during the last four years. We have the needs, with the blades, cement and the passenger service but nothing has moved except lips for four years. How many studies do we need? We have seen many studies in the last ten years. They have created a spiral of

cost because of the time factor,” she said.

The Matapedia-Gaspé line was put in a dormant state over 61% of its length, precisely east of Caplan, in 2015 by the government of Philippe Couillard, right after its acquisition for \$4 million by that same government. That amount represents the payables of the Gaspésie Railway Society, an entity controlled by the four MRCs covering the territory comprised between Matapedia and Gaspé. That body has remained the line operator since.

The dormant state of the Caplan to Gaspé line forces Port Daniel’s McInnis Cement and Gaspé’s LM Wind Power to send by truck cement and windmill blades to New Richmond, at a much higher cost. That freight is then transferred to rail cars. Some cement is also trucked to Nouvelle because of the frequency limitation in the weekly number of loaded cars crossing on the two Cascapedia-St-Jules bridges.

Minister Moreau refused to give an indication about the

delays that will be needed to reopen the line, between Caplan and Port-Daniel as well as between Port Daniel and Gaspé.

The mayor of Gaspé, Daniel Côté, still hopes “that the train will be back to Gaspé in 2022.”

Pierre Moreau also made a couple of announcements that had already been made earlier this year by various people. The Caplan to Port Daniel part of the line now bears a “business case,” status, which means that works, like the replacement of 20,000 ties and engineering studies needed to prepare future repairs on some bridges and the replacement of the Cascapedia-St-Jules bridges can proceed.

The Port Daniel to Gaspé stretch of railroad will not benefit from upgrading works. Some experts will assess the work required to fix the rock slide that left the rails hanging over a few metres near the Port Daniel cement plant and the Gascons fault. Another fault near Douglastown has to be assessed.