

## About 150 people attend railway rally

Gilles Gagné

GASPÉ: – About 150 people attended the August 18 rally for a faster railway refurbishment in the Gaspé Peninsula. They want to shorten the seven-year delay announced by Quebec Premier François Legault on April 25. The rally took place at the Gaspé intermodal station.

The initiative came from the regional executives of the three Opposition parties, namely the Parti Québécois, Québec Solidaire and the Liberal Party. Politicians mainly left the microphone to the citizens though, and those people want a return of the train to Gaspé before 2026.

Barachois' Cynthia Patterson reminded the crowd that she started fighting for the protection of train services "34 years and one month ago, we fought to protect our stations, our rails, to keep our dining car, our luggage service, to keep our passenger train and our freight service, and we are still fighting."

The Quebec government put the Caplan to Gaspé stretch of railway in a dormant state after acquiring it in 2015. It represents 60% of the Matapédia to Gaspé line's length. The move has been questioned since because the needs of Gaspé Peninsula industrial clients have been increasing fast since, especially for the industries located east of Caplan.

In addition, VIA Rail's passenger service has been suspended since September 2013 because of the state of some bridges. VIA Rail's Chaleur train was the most used regional link of the federal transporter, attracting more ridership than the Saguenay and Abitibi

trains together.

"In addition to development, we need the train for our people, who use it to visit their family but also to have access to some health services," added Cynthia Patterson, denouncing the cuts that have plagued public transport in the region over recent years, with VIA Rail and Orléans Express notably.

"Who is going to enjoy spending 17 hours on the bus?" she summed up, underlining the lack of vision of the country's politicians. "We (in Canada) are one of the only places in the world where we are obliged to turn a profit on the rails. (...) Elsewhere, it is an essential service."

Ms. Patterson also sees a battle for the anglophone community. "Our fight back (for rail services) has to make sure that we reach out to the anglophone community, which represented 40% of the ridership in the Gaspé Peninsula."

Gilles Lamy, a former VIA Rail and CN worker who co-founded the Coalition of Gaspésians for the Return of the Train, pointed out that "taking seven years to repair the line is laughing at people."

Quoting historian Jean-Marie Fallu, who said that between 1907 and 1911, with limited means, the 125 kilometres of line between Port Daniel and Gaspé was built, Mr. Lamy affirmed that in 2019 we can go faster.

"They built 25 bridges, on that stretch back then and now, we only have to repair them, with today's means," remarked Gilles Lamy.

Another founding member of the same coalition, Bernard Babin, challenged Premier Legault to duplicate the model



Cynthia Patterson thinks the seven-year delay suggested by Quebec premier François Legault is unacceptable.

applied between Winnipeg and Churchill, Manitoba, where a line damaged to a much larger

extent than the Gaspé railway, was repaired in less than a year.

"Mr. Legault, I challenge

you to repair the line in one year," said Mr. Babin.

Tony Savino, vice-president of the CSN union in the Gaspé Peninsula, underlined the fact that "the REM (Réseau express métropolitain) and the Champlain bridge received billions of dollars in Montreal while here, we are left with crumbs and we are supposed to greet it as if they are doing us a favour."

Mr. Savino added that the CSN is ready to mobilize its thousands of members in the Gaspé Peninsula on the train issue if necessary.

Geoff Clayden, of Québec Solidaire, reminded the audience that for decades, the oil industry and the automobile industry lobbied against train

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transport and that it is time for the governments to restore some fairness. "The return of the train must find a place in that movement."

In May 2017, then Premier

Philippe Couillard announced \$100 million for the refurbishment of the Gaspé line but that money is administered by the Bureau Québécois des infrastructures, and the procedure used by that entity is strict and slow. Political decisions could accelerate the process.