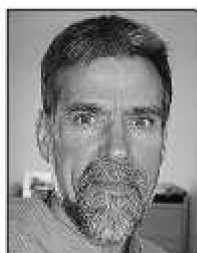


Editorial page



Commentary

Gilles Gagné

Another mobilization is needed to get our train service back sooner

Over the last 30 years, citizens have repeatedly participated in the saving the Gaspé Peninsula train services or the very railroad. They have succeeded so far in the preservation of the tracks and an upcoming August 18 rally in Gaspé could be instrumental in the return of full-fledged train services between Matapédia and Caplan.

At the present time, railway services, despite a nice growth of freight traffic between Matapédia and Caplan since 2015, are still serving only part of the Gaspé Peninsula. The line east of Caplan was put in a dormant state by Quebec's Ministry of Transport upon its acquisition for the Caplan-Percé stretch and between Percé and Gaspé six months later.

The VIA Rail passenger train has been suspended since September 2013 over the whole line. The Amiral tourist train is also suspended, since the fall of 2014. The state of the two Cascapédia-St-Jules railway bridges is also hampering the volume of freight traffic passing on them. Those bridges are presently being replaced.

All those limitations represent handicaps for a region that doesn't need hurdles, considering that its citizens have already experienced more than

their share over the last three decades.

Windmill blades are currently hauled between Gaspé and New Richmond by trucks. This is at a significantly higher cost than if they were loaded on rail cars near the LM Wind Power plant before being exported to Texas. That truck haul is therefore affecting the company's competitiveness and it is congesting our roads, in addition to causing wear and tear.

The environmental side is also too often forgotten. Moving freight and people by train cuts polluting gas emissions five to six fold. That aspect will have an increased value as time passes.

Cement is hauled by trucks to terminals in New Richmond and Nouvelle in order to be transferred to rail cars. That too hampers McInnis Cement's competitiveness.

The Gaspésie Railway Society, the municipal entity operating freight trains on the line, also loses millions of dollars in annual revenues because of shortened freight haul.

The McInnis Cement example does not end there. Most of the cement delivered to east and southern New Brunswick would normally be transported by trains, if the line was open to Port Daniel. Since a significant fee is attached to the load transfer from trucks to rail cars, some cement leaving the plant in trucks remains in trucks, especially when the distance between the origin and the destination is between 400 and 1,000 kilometres, a relatively short stretch by railway standards. The same applies to input.

The cement delivered to New Brunswick is hauled in trucks coming from New Brunswick and leaves very little in benefits to the Gaspé Peninsula. The same applies to material produced by McInnis Cement. Hauling it by train would change that. The stretch between Matapédia and Port

Daniel would at least generate work and revenue for a regional entity, the Gaspésie Railway Society.

That is what we know but how many business opportunities have we lost and have been delayed because our railway is in working order only over slightly more than one-third of its network? There as well, we lose efficiency for our businesses, valuable jobs and spinoffs.

Moreover, the passenger train hiatus also affects our economy, our social fabric and our environment.

So Gaspésians have to stand up again for the future of the railway. We can say again because, for example, in the winter of 1994, Rural Dignity held over two days of well-attended public hearings to claim the protection of the Matapédia to Gaspé passenger train. Those hearings were crucial in saving the service, as then Canada's Transport Minister Doug Young had decided to axe it. The popularity of the hearings and the arguments raised during them convinced the authorities to protect our train.

In January 2006, the threat was even greater, since the Matapédia-Chandler stretch, deprived of its biggest customer, the Smurfit-Stone linerboard mill in New Richmond, was subjected to an abandonment request by then owner, the Société des Chemins de fer du Québec.

On January 29, 2006 up to 450 people took the train to Gaspé on a Saturday morning to show the federal and Quebec politicians that the line was an essential service. It led to the salvage of the line in June 2007.

Since the beginning of 2015, the Coalition of Gaspésians for the return of the train has also carried out extensive work to keep the fire alive. Thousands of people have signed petitions, written messages and letters, and reacted on social media.

Now, more precisely on August 18, the region has to show the Coalition avenir Québec government of François Legault, that seven additional years are an unacceptable delay for the refurbishment of the line between Caplan and Gaspé.

If the message is strong enough, premier Legault, whose party has no political base in the region although he wants one, should understand that we don't deserve the treatment reserved for second or third class citizens. We need a functional railway as soon as possible and the technology is there to provide it. What is lacking now is the deployment of proper means to achieve a return of trains to Gaspé in three or four years.