

## Gaspé mayor receives positive feedback about transportation file

Gilles Gagné

GASPÉ: - In late February the mayor of Gaspé, Daniel Côté, met with Quebec government ministers and high-ranking civil servants to discuss essential issues for the town, the Côte-de-Gaspé MRC and the Gaspé Peninsula.

Mayor Côté says that he was “wearing my four hats,” during that business trip, as he is also the Côte-de-Gaspé prefect, president of the RéGIM (*Régie intermunicipale de transport Gaspésie – Îles-de-la-Madeleine*) and president of the aerial services committee for the *Union des municipalités du Québec*.

“The aerial infrastructure problems are solved since the new government made an announcement over the fall,” says Daniel Côté, referring to the \$8.33 million announced in December for the Grand River airport, the \$3.58 million slated for the Gaspé airport and the \$4.7 million earmarked for the Sainte-Anne-des-Monts airstrip.

He also points out that a year ago the former government adopted the partial reimbursement measure for users, which can translate into a \$500 or 30% reimbursement of plane tickets annually.

“Now, we must tackle the price of tickets and improve the fiscal measures (for airport operators). The previous government had created a national (Quebec-wide) committee supposed to take care of those aspects. The committee members never met. In fact, its creation remains to be completed. Now, the first meeting will take place. I was offered a date pretty soon, as in next week. I will try to make some time for that but it is not sure yet. We can say that things are moving,” explains Mr. Côté.

It often costs more to fly between Gaspé and Montreal than between Montreal and Europe, a situation criticized by numerous organizations and individuals since that situation also prevails in other Quebec regions.

Rail transportation was also covered during Daniel Côté’s visit to the Quebec Transport Department.

“The orientation of the new government remains the same,” says Daniel Côté. He is referring to Coalition avenir Québec minister François Bonnardel’s statement to the effect that the \$100 million budget announced on May 5, 2017, by

former premier Philippe Couillard for the Gaspé line will be invested as expected.

Is a date for the return of trains to Gaspé set? “It officially remains 2022 but as long as the studies are not completed, it is a tentative date. They (Transport Quebec officials) don’t want to say too much. We sometimes hear that the service could be restored by the end of 2021 but I am cautious with that,” says Mr. Côté.

“One of the problems that marked the past years is that the MTQ (Quebec’s Ministry of Transport) had no railway engineer, someone with a thorough knowledge of infrastructures. Many (government) people were saying whatever they want because the level of knowledge was very low at that department. Now that they have hired some engineers, things are going in the right direction,” he comments.

As president of the RéGIM, Daniel Côté approached Transport Quebec’s management in order to ask them if it is possible to accelerate the annual confirmation of the commuter service’s regular funding.

“It takes between 12 and 18 months before getting confirmation. We always get the funding but it is so complicated. The accountability reports are also very complicated to fill,” he points out, confident that his message was heard.

RéGIM had a good year, with an increase in ridership from 113,000 to 116,000 users between 2017 and 2018. That number is including adapted transport for handicapped people.

“Our regular annual grant amounts to \$600,000. The gas tax reimbursement brings in between \$1.1 million and \$1.4 million yearly and the rest comes from the ticket sales, for a total budget of \$3 million,” says Mr. Côté.

The property transfer of the port of Gaspé from the federal to the Quebec government will require some patience, says the mayor of Gaspé, after exchanges with Transport Quebec officials.

“It is up to the federal government to move. To put it short, it is not progressing fast. I wanted to make sure that the Quebec government has not changed its mind regarding the acceptance of the port’s property. We also wanted to make sure that if a stake is not clear in Quebec City, they can always call us to get information. We told them that the access road to the port and the underground pipes all belong to the federal government,” explains Daniel Côté.

In what kind of state is the port? “We know nothing about it. The port was rebuilt 34 or 35 years ago. It is well-protected from the storms. It looks in fine shape but it requires an assessment. Ottawa has never been able to tell us anything about its state. We don’t know either how things will proceed if repairs are necessary. Will Ottawa do the work and then transfer the property or will Ottawa transfer the property to the Quebec government with a sum of money for the repairs, which will then be carried out at the provincial level? I could bet on the second option,” concludes Mr. Côté.