

Groups organize rally in Gaspé asking for train return before 2026

Gilles Gagné

PERCÉ: – Groups of citizens and opposition political parties are uniting to organize a rally on August 18 to ask the Quebec government for a faster return of train services between Caplan and Gaspé. The August 18 rally will take place at the intermodal station in Gaspé.

Those involved want to reach the broadest cross section of the population in order to make Quebec Premier François Legault understand that regaining the service only in seven years, like he said on April 25 in New Richmond, is way too long.

“We have not benefitted from passenger train services for eight years in Gaspé, Percé and Chandler. When we are told that it will take another seven years, we feel that such a delay is unacceptable. Our population needs VIA Rail’s passenger train, our industries like LM Wind Power and the Port Daniel cement plant need the freight train and we want the tourist train back. We want it back as soon as possible,” explains Percé resident Line Beaudin, one of the organizers of the August 18 rally.

She emphasizes that when there is a will, there is a way, citing the fact that some Montreal projects, like the new Champlain Bridge and the REM (the Réseau express métropolitain light train), are built in three or four years, and cost respectively \$4.5 billion and \$6.3 billion.

“Our line is already built. There is no need to move houses around, to expropriate anybody. It must simply be repaired,” she adds.

Line Beaudin is a member of the Parti Québécois but her role in the August 18 event comes mainly from her involvement in a Percé committee that has been working over the last few years to better the commuter service between that town, the region and the rest of Quebec.

The committee has been particularly active in the Orléans Express file and was instrumental in the return of a year-around bus service in Percé and the re-establishment of the link between Percé and Gaspé. The group is also quite active in the train file through writing regular letters to the government and meeting politicians. In fact, the train issue was the first file defended by the Percé committee.



Groups of citizens and opposition parties want to accelerate the return of trains to Gaspé before 2026.

Photo: G. Gagné

“Following the announcement by Mr. Legault to the effect that it would take seven more years to bring back the train, we said no. We approached the other opposition parties and we finally opted for a popular event at the train station, with activities for the family, and speeches to support the train,” explains Line Beaudin.

The Liberal Party of Quebec and Quebec solidaire promptly approved the initiative. However, Line Beaudin specifies that “politicians will not take too much time speaking that day. We want representatives of citizen groups to speak first and foremost. We asked some prefects to speak as well,” adds Ms. Beaudin.

Bernard Babin, a founding member of the Coalition of Gaspésians for the return of the train, will likely speak publicly on August 18. He points out that the such popular initiatives are important to convince politicians to move faster.

“When we think of climate change affecting our planet, we must be sensitive to the alert signs expressed by scientists from all over the world. We must therefore make concrete moves in order to reduce greenhouse gases. The train brings a transportation solution that reduces by five or six fold the oil consumption when we move people or freight,” says Mr. Babin.

“Our roads are increasingly congested by cars and trucks, a factor triggering exorbitant maintenance costs. We must put emphasis on transportation means that are more respectful of the environment and that take into account our capacity as taxpayers,” he adds.

The line between Caplan and Gaspé was suspended in

2015 by then Transport Minister Robert Poëti, of the Liberal government of Philippe Couillard. That decision was made even though the Port Daniel cement plant was under construction since May 2014 and that all major cement plants in North America are served by a railway.

In the summer of 2016, another major customer started inquiring about using the railway, LM Wind Power, the windmill blade manufacturer based in Gaspé. A major export contract was signed by the company in August of that year and the first windmill blade train left Gaspé for Texas on December 3, 2016.

However, because of the fact that the railway was closed east of Caplan, those blades were and are still trucked to New Richmond, where they are transferred to rail cars. This transfer is very costly.

Since the summer of 2017, a sizeable part of the McInnis Cement production in Port Daniel is trucked to New Richmond and Nouvelle, where it is also transferred to rail cars, again at a much higher cost than if that output was loaded at the plant of origin.

Since the spring of 2015 the line has been owned by Quebec’s Department of Transport because the Gaspésie Railway Society, a municipal entity, experienced financial problems at the end of 2014.

The Gaspésie Railway Society was nevertheless retained as the operator of freight trains. The fact that windmill blades and cement are loaded in New Richmond deprives the transporter of millions of dollars in revenues annually.