

## Quebec budget confirms money for the railway

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: —The stakeholders pushing for a faster upgrading of the Gaspé Peninsula railroad are pleased that the *Coalition avenir Québec* government has announced to the effect that \$85 million is earmarked in the March 21 budget for the restoration of the Matapédia to Gaspé line.

The government wrote down \$85 million for the Gaspé Peninsula railroad repairs in the 2019-2020 budget document. The amount surprised a lot of people, thinking that new money was poured in the railway file. That sum is in reality the balance of the \$100 million announced in May 2017 in New Carlisle by former Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard.

The prefect of the Côte-de-Gaspé MRC and mayor of Gaspé, Daniel Côté, knows very well that the users of his area will not see trains circulate this year or in 2020 because a number of studies must be completed before that outcome can be envisioned but he sees an acceleration of the railway file since 2018.

“It is the budget of continuity. The sum of \$85 million comes from the initial \$100 million less the \$15 million invested last year. The return of trains to Gaspé is on paper but the paperwork must be updated before getting the money necessary to carry out works. What we see is an accelerated process, under the new government,” says Daniel Côté.

In 2015, when Quebec’s Department of Transport ac-

quired the Matapédia to Gaspé line, the Couillard government decided to put in a dormant state the stretch between Caplan and Gaspé, which represents 200 of the line’s 325 kilometres.

However, the Port Daniel cement plant was under construction at the time and LM Wind Power was negotiating for important agreements related to windmill blade exports. The result is that the blades from Gaspé and the cement from Port Daniel are circulating over long stretches of road, as to reach a transshipment point with the railway, mainly in New Richmond, despite the presence of the railway at or near the points of origin.

Éric Dubé, president of the Gaspésie Railway Society, also sees an acceleration of railroad upgrading. That firm is under municipal control and was the owner of the railroad until the beginning of 2015, when maintenance costs proved too high. Among other responsibilities, the firm remained the operator of freight trains.

“Since the money was put under the responsibility of the *Bureau Québécois des infrastructures*, it is not submitted to standard budgetary constraints; it is there to be used as projects are ready,” emphasizes Mr. Dubé.

At least two major developments are expected to unfold in 2019, the first one being the replacement of the two Cascapédia-St-Jules bridges, a project that could get its environmental approval soon. The two new bridges could cost between \$20 million and \$30 million,



Photo: G. Gagné

*Traffic on the Gaspé Peninsula railway could triple again once the line is reopened to Gaspé.*

maybe more. Close to two years will be needed to replace the bridges.

“Through building the new bridges beside the two old ones, the cost will be reduced because freight traffic won’t have to be interrupted. There is no need to build the two bridges in six weeks,” points out Mr. Dubé, referring to the obligation of not stopping rail traffic over a long period.

Currently, the two older bridges slow down freight traffic because Transports Québec limits to 10 the number of fully loaded cement cars that can pass on the old bridges weekly. The problem

is partly solved because the cement cars are only loaded at two-thirds of their capacity in New Richmond, the other third being loaded at a second terminal located west of the bridges, in Nouvelle.

There is no limit for the number of cars loaded with windmill blades because they are light.

The second important development of the year will take place between Matapédia and Port Daniel, as Transports Québec launched on March 20 a call for tenders implying the replacement of 30,000 to 40,000 wooden ties.

The reopening of the line between Caplan and Port

Daniel could take place before the end of 2020. That would be the best scenario. Côte-de-Gaspé MRC prefect Daniel Côté believes that the railway will be reopened to Gaspé in 2022.

Freight traffic almost tripled between Matapédia and Caplan between 2015 and 2018, from 1,624 to 4,323 carloads. That increase comes essentially from the part that was put in a dormant state by the previous government. It therefore requires a costly transshipment from trucks to rail.

That traffic could likely triple once the line is reopened to Gaspé.

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