

Seven years to complete the refurbishment of the Matapedia-Gaspé line according to Premier Legault

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: – According to Quebec Premier François Legault, seven years will be needed to refurbish the Matapedia to Gaspé railway. That delay is considered too long by a significant number of Gaspesian economic and municipal stakeholders.

Since 2015, the 325-kilometre line has been dormant over the 200 kilometres between Caplan and Gaspé, however, about two-thirds of its freight traffic is generated by customers located along that dormant part.

That situation generates significant transshipment costs because the windmill blades of LM Wind Power in Gaspé and part of Port Daniel's McInnis Cement production have to be trucked to New Richmond in order to reach the railway section that is active. Some cement is also trucked to Nouvelle to be transferred to railway cars.

Premier François Legault was in New Richmond on April 25 to confirm announcements that were already known, the replacement of the Cascapedia-St-Jules railway bridges and additional tie replacement contracts along the line.

He indicated that “during the peak period, next year, 170 new jobs will be created, well-paid jobs, which will last seven years.”

It was the first time that an upgrading schedule was mentioned by the Quebec government since his predecessor Philippe Couillard announced on May 5, 2017, an amount of \$100 million to repair the line between Matapedia and Gaspé. Mr. Couillard had failed to give any time frame at the time.

A balance of \$85 million remains of the total amount, since \$15 million was invested between May 2017 and now.

Asked to explain how a \$6.3 billion project like the *Réseau express métropolitain* can be carried out in three years and three months while it will take seven years to realize a \$100 million refurbishment job in the Gaspé Peninsula, François Legault skipped a direct answer and apparently sees an advantage in such a long delay of the railway in the sense that “the 170 jobs will last longer if works takes seven years.”

Regarding that remark, Bonaventure Member of the



Photo: G. Gagné

The president of the Gaspésie Railway Society, Éric Dubé, on the right, thinks future talks with Transport Minister François Bonnardel and Premier François Legault could lead to completing the upgrading of the railway sooner.

National Assembly Sylvain Roy emphasizes that “the creation of quality jobs associated with the consolidation of the economy through the use of the railway will bear more durable prosperity. An access to mobility and transport are determining factors for a region’s prosperity, more than works on the transport infrastructure itself. The delays could be shorter, it is evident, and each year of waiting time can translate into business opportunity losses for entrepreneurs whose business plans necessitate an access to rail services.”

Quebec’s Transport Minister François Bonnardel, who accompanied Premier Legault during his New Richmond visit, justified the seven-year delay by saying that “there is a lot, a lot of work left,” to complete the railway upgrading.

“I know people would like to bring that (delay) to three or four years but it is impossible,” he added.

The mayor of Gaspé, Daniel Côté, finds the time needed to bring back the train in his town a bit exaggerated. He was aiming for a return of the service in 2022, not in 2026.

“I was expecting a much shorter delay than that. (...) It is fine to have 170 jobs but the 500 jobs of LM Windpower that depend heavily on the transport of (windmill) blades by rail towards Texas are more important. They are permanent (jobs),” specifies Mayor Côté.

Alexandre Boulay, who is director general of the LM Windpower plant in Gaspé,

thinks that “the pace must be accelerated. We must think in terms of winter works. There are fewer construction contracts during the winter and the contractors are more available then. In November 2016, we started the expansion of the plant at the end of November and works were carried out during the winter. We must also think of performance enhanced specifications (in the calls for tenders), a method that allows carrying out a project in a shorter amount of time.”

New Richmond’s municipal councillor Geneviève Bracconnier emphasizes the importance of insuring the competitive capacity of LM Windpower in restoring the service to Gaspé. Currently, the windmill blades cover 200 kilometres before reaching the transshipment point to railcars in New Richmond. It is a much more expensive means than the railway.

“We are talking about maintaining expertise. LM is a worldwide leader,” she states.

The mayor of Chandler, Louisette Langlois, also finds the seven-year delay referred to by François Legault very long.

“Four years, yes, but seven years? I am trying to relaunch my port. We have tonnage that will come from McInnis Cement. By rail, the costs are lower,” she states.

Éric Dubé, president of the Gaspésie Railway Society and mayor of New Richmond, believes that there are ways to cut the line upgrading delay. “We have to see what causes that delay. We will discuss with Mr. Legault and Mr. Bonnardel and

try to go faster.”

The Gaspésie Railway Society, an entity under municipi-

pal control, is the operator of trains between Matapedia and Caplan, the part of the line that has remained open since 2015. The line officially belongs to Quebec’s Department of Transport since May 2015.

In 2018, the Gaspésie Railway Society hauled 4,323 freight cars between New Richmond and Matapedia, almost three times more than in 2015. That growth should continue in 2019 but possibly at a slower pace considering that some loads will go by transport because the rail line through the middle of the Port Daniel cement plant cannot be used.

Upgrading the railway bridges represents the bulk of the refurbishment. The VIA Rail passenger service has been suspended since September 2013. It is expected to return when the federal transporter will have a guarantee that the service can be restored to Gaspé.