

Think twice before dismantling railroads, says Éric Dubé to Railway Summit stakeholders

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: – The president of the Gaspésie Railway Society, Éric Dubé, asks the Quebec Transport Ministry and other regions' stakeholders to think twice before dismantling a railroad, considering the impact it will have in the long-term development of the area served by that railway.

Mr. Dubé intervened on September 17 in a regional meeting held in Matane in preparation for a Quebec-wide Railway Summit that will take place in Drummondville on December 9. Quebec's Department of Transport and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs are the main organizers of the event.

The summit will deal with four main issues: the permanence of railroad infrastructures, the safety of rail transport, the optimal use of railways for passenger use and freight and, lastly, the environmental imprint as well as the safe and harmonious cohabitation alongside rail infrastructures.

"I centered my interventions on the importance of maintaining a railway network in the Quebec regions. Some regions let their railroad go to be turned into bicycle trails and people regret it now. They tell me rebuilding the railroad would be exorbitant. We were able to protect our railroad in the Gaspé Peninsula and a lot of work remains to be done before reopening it to Gaspé but we know that it will be carried out," points out



Photo: G. Gagné

The Gaspésie Railway Society president Éric Dubé says the company's task will be much easier a few years down the road when the main focus will be to operate trains.

Mr. Dubé.

The priorities vary from one region to another, notably regarding the relation between the transporters and the municipalities.

"In the Lower Saint Lawrence, the reality is different. They are dealing with CN (Canadian National), a private company whose focus is to make as much cash as possible. CN mainly decides on many issues and then informs the municipalities. Our situation is different. The Gaspésie Railway Society is a transporter owned by the municipalities," explains Mr. Dubé, who is also prefect of the Bonaventure MRC and mayor of New Richmond.

The board members of the Gaspésie Railway Society are mostly mayors and prefects.

The work of that board will be greatly simplified a few years down the road when

the service is re-established between Caplan and Gaspé. Quebec's Department of Transport owns the Matapédia to Gaspé line. Another line owned by Transport Quebec, the Beauce railroad, was partly dismantled and made unfit for service over two-thirds of its length.

"We are currently operating freight trains but we spend a lot of time putting pressure on governments in order to speed up the refurbishment of the line, and make sure that the money will be available for bridge repairs and so on. It will be much easier a few years down the road when we will be able to concentrate solely on operating trains between Gaspé and Matapédia," says Éric Dubé.

He became president of the Gaspésie Railway Society in the spring of 2014, when the company was running into a

difficult time. The transporter was the owner of the line back then but mistakes made by the previous administrations and austerity measures applied by the new government of Philippe Couillard forced the Gaspésie Railway Society to ask for court protection in November of the same year.

Transport Quebec acquired the line for the value of the debt and retained the municipal entity as the operator of the line.

"Safety will also represent an important part of the December summit," says Éric Dubé.

"When I became president of the company, it was about a year after the Lac-Mégantic tragedy. I checked with our team to inquire about the possibility that such a tragedy could occur here. We don't haul oil trains and we don't have the same kind of grades. We also decided to put emphasis on a sound infrastructure, through maintaining the line in a good state, as well as our locomotives and through offering our staff good training," says Mr. Dubé.

The Gaspésie Railway So-

ciety has also decided to be transparent, which "is easier to do when you don't haul hazardous goods. I know it is not as easy in Lower Saint Lawrence with CN. My mayoral colleagues from that region are not always informed of the presence of hazardous goods," he adds.

Éric Dubé hopes that Transports Québec will implement measures to enhance rail traffic in the province, notably over shorter distance routes.

"If we want to reduce greenhouse gases, we will have to put more freight and more passengers on trains. We know that trains are very efficient in that regard over long distances, however, we have been able to set up a woodchip traffic between the Nouvelle sawmill and Rivière-du-Loup, a relatively short distance for a railway. When CN decided that they were no longer interested in providing us with the cars to maintain that agreement, we had to buy our own fleet of woodchip cars. There should be a policy to support such initiatives," Mr. Dubé states.