

## RAIL TRANSPORT SUMMIT:

# Transports Québec will announce a new time frame for rail traffic resumption between Caplan and Gaspé

Gilles Gagné

DRUMMONDVILLE: – Quebec’s Transport Minister François Bonnardel says his ministry will soon announce an earlier time frame for rail traffic resumption between Caplan and Gaspé. The announcement will likely come early in 2020, says the minister.

While answering questions from SPEC following his speech, Minister Bonnardel made that statement on December 9, at the end of the Rail Transport Summit, organized by Transports Québec in Drummondville.

“Gaspésians will get good news over the next few weeks. I thought for a while that we would be ready to announce it before the Christmas break but it is not sure. We work very hard at reducing that delay,” says Minister Bonnardel.

That delay was seven years when Premier François Legault came to New Richmond on April 26 specifically to reassure Gaspésians about his new government’s intentions regarding the restoration of the Matapédia to Gaspé railroad. Mr. Bonnardel was with him.

However, the mention of seven years caused frustrations within the ranks of the Gaspé Peninsula socio-economic leaders, who thought that it was possible to secure traffic resumption between Caplan and Gaspé by 2022 instead of 2026.

In August, following a demonstration held in Gaspé by some of those leaders, Premier Legault declared three days later that traffic resumption would occur in 2025 instead of 2026. That small reduction in the time frame left the region’s leaders unsatisfied once more. While there have been no additional demonstrations since the August 18 one, pressures were put at another level, through letters, meetings and lobbying.

In Drummondville, Minister Bonnardel did not specify when the announcement pertaining to a delay reduction before traffic resumption between Caplan and Gaspé will be made.

The president of the Gaspésie Railway Society, Éric Dubé, welcomes quite favourably the reassuring commitment made by Minister



LM Wind Power must send its blades by truck between its York industrial park and New Richmond, where they are transferred to railcars.  
Photo: G. Gagné

Bonnardel. Mr. Dubé attended the Rail Transport Summit in Drummondville.

“In his initial morning speech, he mentioned our file and reiterated his will to bring the train back to Gaspé. He talked again about our train in his second speech. So it is a good sign,” points out Mr. Dubé.

“About the time factor, in order to bring the train back to Gaspé faster, we now know that the Ministry of Transport will regroup the calls for tenders, in order to make the contracts going to the construction entrepreneurs bigger (...) It will be the case for the eight bridges to fix between Caplan and Port Daniel. They will be regrouped in two calls for tenders,” adds Mr. Dubé.

“Larger contracts will attract more contractors to the calls for tenders. Transports Québec has problems raising interest among contractors when the contracts are too small. Over the last year, some calls for tenders worth \$1 million were ignored by bidders because they are too busy and won’t bother for such an amount,” explains the president of the Gaspésie Railway Society.

Serge Saint-Pierre, president of the CSN union for the Gaspé Peninsula and the Magdalen Islands, a union that has advocated for a faster return of

full rail services to Gaspé, fears “that hauling opportunities and projects will be lost if it takes too long.”

The Caplan to Gaspé stretch was put in a dormant state in March 2015 by then Minister of Transport Robert Poëti, who made that decision even though the Port Daniel cement plant was under construction at the time and given that no North American plants of that size, with a potential output of 2.2 million tonnes, operate without a railway.

At the same time, the LM

Wind Power plant in Gaspé was in contact with some potential customers in the United States for the export of windmill blades, and rail transport was considered a strong tool in sending that production south of the border.

It took three years for the Liberal Party Government of Philippe Couillard to announce \$100 million for the refurbishment of the Matapédia to Gaspé line. That announcement was made on May 5, 2017, in New Carlisle but no major work on that line’s

bridges was undertaken before 2019. The bridges are considered the main preoccupation on the Gaspé line because there are 95 of them, of various lengths, over 202 miles, and some require major upgrade replacements.

Because of Philippe Couillard’s government’s slowness in coming up with the means to repair the line over its full length, no work on the bridges was undertaken during 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018. The only bridge replaced during that stretch was one of the two Ristigouche South East structures, a relatively small contract of \$900,000 carried out in August and September 2017.

In December 2016, LM Wind Power started using the railway to export the blades made in Gaspé to Texas but the company must haul them by truck between its York industrial park location and New Richmond, where they are transferred to railcars.

McInnis Cement must do the same with a part of its output, as it is trucked to New Richmond and Nouvelle before being transferred to railcars.

The transshipment cost affects the competitiveness of LM Windpower and McInnis Cement.

