



Anthony Bernard Prince (second from the right) thinks VIA Rail must provide a passenger train service even if the Atlantic bubble remains in place.

Photo: G. Gagné

Growing number of Gaspésians want VIA Rail service back

On shorter route if the Atlantic bubble is maintained

Gilles Gagné

MATAPEDIA – A growing number of Gaspésians think that VIA Rail should come back to serve their region, even if the Atlantic bubble is maintained after November 1, the expected date of traffic resumption on some of the routes used by the federal government-owned transporter.

The Halifax-Montreal Ocean train is one of the services supposed to return on November 1, like the Canadian, between Toronto and Vancouver, however, the public health authorities of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia have maintained the so-called Atlantic bubble intact over the last six months and nothing indicates that it will change in the near future.

That Atlantic bubble has greatly hampered travelling between Central Canada, namely Quebec and Ontario, and the Atlantic provinces. The incidence of the coronavirus is higher in Central Canada, which has prompted the Atlantic provinces to close their borders or impose a 14-day quarantine to the residents who have travelled to Quebec and Ontario.

“I understand why Nova Scotia and New Brunswick want to remain cautious. The COVID is not as big there as it is in Quebec. They don’t want to affect their record but it is a shame that we will likely not be able to travel between the region and Quebec City or Montreal because of decisions made in other provinces,” points out Anthony Bernard Prince, a Port Daniel West resident who has been advocating since 2014 for the return of train services east of New Richmond, including VIA Rail.

Should VIA Rail temporarily run a night train or a day train between Montreal, Quebec City and the Gaspé Peninsula?

“Either one would work the best. Friends and family can’t go away. I think of sick people and older people who must go to the city for medical reasons. The bus is not really a good way to travel over such long distances when you are old or sick. Flying? Most people can’t afford it. It would be surprising to see the part of riders from the Gaspé taking the train in Campbellton, before the service was suspended, compared to the people of New Brunswick. A lot of people here were taking the train in Campbellton,” adds Mr. Prince.

“People from the Gaspé want to see the train back. If we take a bi-directional train, the passenger train could even stop in Carleton instead of Matapédia. The line is in good shape between Matapédia and Carleton,” he stresses.

After suspending its service between Matapédia and New Carlisle in September 2013, the management of VIA Rail announced that the service would be back once the line is safe. It became clear afterwards that one of the conditions was the replacement of the Cascapédia-St-Jules bridges, which is currently underway.

The new bridges will only be operational at some point in 2021. Work is progressing well but other bridges must be repaired between New Richmond and New Carlisle before service resumption on that portion of the Gaspé line. Trains can be turned in New Carlisle, unlike Carleton, where two locomotives would be required, one facing west

and the other facing east.

The VIA Rail service between New Carlisle and Gaspé was suspended in December 2011 because of the state of some bridges but a bus shuttle was offered to the people east of New Carlisle until September 2013.

Cynthia Patterson, the long-time leader of the fight conducted to improve rail services in the Gaspé Peninsula, fully agrees with the scenarios drawn by Anthony Bernard Prince.

“All those ideas are excellent. It is ideal. In confinement during the spring, I found that we were really isolated, had we been forced to travel for an emergency. Technically, VIA Rail can resume the service between Montreal and Matapédia, and to Carleton as well. They have the capacity. Out of gross opportunism, considering that there is a (Orléans Express) bus service, they probably don’t want to do it,” says Ms. Patterson.

She is still worried about the accumulated deterioration of the transportation situation in the Gaspé Peninsula. She is also perfectly aware that the COVID resurgence might provide Via Rail with the perfect context to delay its service resumption between Montreal and Halifax, and refrain from opting for a midway solution in establishing a temporary link between Montreal, Matapédia and Carleton.

“It is appalling that we are so far back. VIA Rail has reduced its service for decades. People need the train. Just to get a specialized medical service in Montreal is a must for many people. The bus is not a solution. Sick people just can’t make it. For a while, we had

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no air service and it is very costly,” she adds.

She hopes that the elected officials of the Gaspé Peninsula will take the occasion offered by the citizens to propel the VIA Rail service resumption file to a higher level.

“We, as citizens, have been carrying out the advocacy work on the railway, in fact the whole transportation file for decades. It is a job for the elected people: the MNAs (Members of National Assembly), the prefects and the mayors. It has been dragging on for too long. I call on the MNAs to take on this work. I fail to see the elected people putting pressure at the Department of Transport, regarding the railway file,” states Cynthia Patterson.

Bonaventure’s Médor Doiron is another citizen pushing for the return of VIA Rail as soon as possible, even if it is limited to Matapédia as a first step. In 2016, Mr. Doiron spearheaded a National Assembly petition to claim an acceleration of the refurbishment work needed to bring back rail services, including the passenger train east of Matapédia. In 2016, the line was already owned by Quebec’s Department of Transport.

“As a board member of the Health and Social Service Integrated Centre and with the prefects of the region, we have already submitted a let-

ter expressing the region’s needs in aerial services. The same claim applies to rail transport. Some people must necessarily travel. I understand that the COVID-19 context might reduce the number of semi-emergencies people have to deal with but it remains an important issue,” analyzes Mr. Doiron.

He thinks the initiative of bringing back some service in Eastern Quebec if the New Brunswick border stays closed to passenger trains will not come from VIA Rail.

“They (VIA Rail administration) will delay the return of the train in Eastern Quebec as long as it is not reinstated in New Brunswick. The passenger train is not considered an essential service in the pandemic context. The federal government should call it an essential service. It is a matter of physical and mental health. The federal government should commit to that,” states Médor Doiron.

His petition in 2016 gathered 5,174 signatures, in collaboration with the Coalition of Gaspésians for the return of the train. As many as 2,250 letters were also sent to the office of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in order to get the federal government involved in the issue.

Médor Doiron also points out that with the RéGIM regional shuttle service it would be possible to assure a link between Matapédia and Gaspé between now and the

time VIA Rail comes back to the Gaspé Peninsula with a full service, something scheduled for 2025 for the towns east of New Carlisle. The return between Matapédia and New Carlisle will come first but no clear timeline has been communicated yet.

Daniel Côté is cautious

Invited to comment on the situation, the mayor of Gaspé and president of RéGIM, Daniel Côté, is cautious about a Via Rail service resumption in the short term.

“The topic is delicate, considering the resurgence of COVID in Quebec and in our region. We always want better transport but in pandemic time, it is delicate. The RéGIM is ready to redeploy its shuttle service if Via Rail comes back before the Holidays (Christmas) period. The evolution of the pandemic will undoubtedly be a key factor in their (VIA management) decision and currently, nothing is less certain,” says Mr. Côté.

He prefers not addressing the issue of asking VIA Rail to implement a shorter route, like a Montreal-Matapédia or Montreal-Carleton link, for now.

VIA Rail is currently operating some trains, mostly in the Quebec City-Windsor corridor, but also in remote areas, where it is considered an essential service, like the Winnipeg to Churchill route.