



## Quebec to develop a rail transport strategy

*“We have neglected rail transport in Quebec,” says Minister Bonnardel*

Gilles Gagné

DRUMMONDVILLE: — Quebec’s Transport Minister François Bonnardel has announced that his government will intensify its support to rail transport of people and freight through the implementation of new governmental initiatives, including a long term “rail strategy.” Another measure is a program to sustain rail infrastructure and emphasis on intermodal transport that includes rail-ways.

Mr. Bonnardel made that announcement on December 9 in Drummondville, at the conclusion of the Rail Transport Summit. The new program is called *Programme de soutien aux infrastructures de transports ferroviaires et à l’intégration modale* (PSIT-FIM).

He does not divulge a budgetary envelope for the program and the rail strategy or a time frame for both but he mentioned to SPEC that “it is a strategy for 20 to 25 years.” He had mentioned minutes earlier in his closing remarks to the 250 participants of the summit that “rail transport was rather forgotten in the priorities of the (Quebec) Transport department (since the beginning of the 1990s).”

Thousands of kilometres of railway was effectively dismantled in Quebec over the last 40 years, some of



*The president of the rail transport committee at Quebec’s Union of Municipalities, Jean-Maurice Matte, is glad that Minister François Bonnardel retained as priorities most of the main orientations made a year earlier at the Railway Forum in Trois-Rivières.* Photo: G. Gagné

them over recent years. In Beauce for example, a Quebec Central line, the Chaudière subdivision, was partly dismantled midway between Charny and Lac-Frontière.

Transports Québec had acquired that line for \$18 million in 2007 and 2008 but authorized its partial dismantlement in April 2015 turning it into a cycling trail. That authorization over 30 kilometres condemned the rest of the line up to Lac-Frontière, a 100-kilometre stretch presenting an annual potential of 3,000 carloads.

In the Gaspé Peninsula, former Transport minister Robert Poëti, the same minister responsible for the Beauce decision, put the line between Caplan and Gaspé in a dormant state in March 2015 de-

spite the fact that the Port Daniel cement plant was under construction and would generate thousands of carloads as well. The line needed upgrading back then but work just started in the fall of 2018 east of Caplan and not on the bridges. Minister Poëti was also mentioned turning that stretch into a cycling trail in March 2015.

François Bonnardel did not mention those examples in Drummondville but he insisted that from now on, it is important for Transports Québec “to send a strong message to the shippers about increasing their access to our rail network, whether we are talking about freight or passengers.”

He also emphasized that “There will be money for line rehabilitation, for the tracks,

bridges, culverts, retaining walls, buildings, sidings and handling equipment,” also for the infrastructure and the tools necessary to increase rail traffic.

Minister Bonnardel affirmed that safety issues will be dealt with seriously in order to avoid another tragedy like Lac-Mégantic’s.

He invited the major transporters such as Canadian National and Canadian Pacific, companies under a federal jurisdiction, to collaborate with Transports Québec to increase rail traffic in the province. In Quebec, 27% of the railways are under provincial jurisdiction and 73% are under federal jurisdiction. There are still 6,300 kilometres of tracks in Quebec.

“We must create synergy with the majors (CN and CP). We must develop a long term vision, overall. That includes

the environment. Transport is part of the problem and we can also be an important part of the solution. Considering that 43% of Quebec’s greenhouse gases are caused by transport, if we want to improve our record, we must reduce our emissions and rail transport is advantageous compared to trucks in that regard,” he explains.

His remarks are well received by most people involved in the railway industry, like the mayor of New Richmond, Éric Dubé, who is also president of the Gaspésie Railway Society. “The government is taking the right way to assure the progress of that transportation mode. We must now sit and make sure that the long term strategy is designed properly to assure the mobility of freight and people.”

The president of the rail transport committee at Quebec’s Union of Municipalities, Jean-Maurice Matte, is also satisfied with what Minister Bonnardel presented at the summit.

“The minister delivered most of the expectations stemming from the Railway Forum held in November 2018. We will make sure that the intentions expressed today (December 9) will become delivered items as well. There are still 500 municipalities served by rail in Quebec,” says Mr. Matte who is also the mayor of Senneterre, in Abitibi, an important railway town.