

Railway “acceleration” likely to yield modest results

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND – The June 3 announcement that five infrastructure projects will be accelerated in the Gaspé Peninsula and the Magdalen Islands will likely yield modest results, including the refection of the Gaspésie Railway Society line, one of the five regional initiatives targeted by the Quebec government in its acceleration commitment.

Two days after the announcement and three days after the first major mention of that Quebec-wide initiative by Premier François Legault, nobody at Transports Québec could specify how an “accel-

eration” of the refurbishment process will translate into time gained at the end of the operation.

“I was in a meeting with Transports Québec people earlier today and nobody could tell us how it will be done,” explained the president of the Gaspésie Railway Society, Éric Dubé on June 4.

In April 2019, Premier Legault announced that seven years would be required to complete the line upgrading. Given the disappointment that such a long delay created among the regional leaders and the ensuing pressure they put on the Quebec government Premier Legault announced at the end

of August 2019 that the work would be finished a year early, in 2025.

In December, Transport Minister François Bonnardel committed to trying to find ways to reduce the time needed to finalize the project but, six months later, there is still no new time frame set. Currently, trains can circulate between Matapédia and Caplan. Port Daniel will be reached at the end of 2021 or at the beginning of 2022.

Éric Dubé's expectations are modest although he is really pushing to accelerate works.

“My understanding of the situation is that if we have to move the railway sideways,

for example, and if we have to expropriate some land to do so, the process will be accelerated. Instead of taking two years, it might take two months. The environmental assessment process, for the characterization of some areas, for example, could be carried out faster without driving down the norms. All that process will not make plans and specifications be produced faster and that is the main obstacle preventing us from going faster regarding the line repairs, especially the bridges,” explains Éric Dubé.

SPEC tried to obtain details about the acceleration process and it took hours before getting a message to the

effect that an answer would come later. The newspaper learned that there is a Transports Québec internal memo circulating asking to stop talking about a faster traffic resumption to Gaspé.

The line upgrading budget is currently endowed with an envelope of \$280 million, including \$45.6 million coming from the federal government.

The two other Gaspé Peninsula projects are the upgrading of Villa Pabos, the seniors' residence located in Chandler, and the moving of Gaspé's Transports Québec garage.

Two other projects are located on the Magdalen Islands.