

## Momentum is gaining for the return of the passenger train service says Coalition

Gilles Gagné

MATAPEDIA – Momentum is building for the return of the VIA Rail Canada's Montreal-Halifax passenger train service, as politicians and groups are asking the public transporter to resume its operations between Montreal and Halifax, considering that the COVID-19 pandemic is increasingly under control.

In the Gaspé Peninsula, the Coalition of Gaspesians for the future of the train, which has been advocating for a gradual return of the passenger train between Matapedia and Gaspé, is asking VIA Rail Canada once more to put back in service the Ocean train between Montreal and Halifax.

One of the Coalition's spokespersons, Bernard Babin, argues that the federal transporter could do more.

"VIA Rail has to resume the service between Montreal and Halifax as soon as possible now that the sanitary situation is getting under control. Moreover, despite VIA Rail's recent statement to the effect that the Matapedia to Gaspé train will only come back once the line is completely repaired to Gaspé. It would be perfectly feasible to come back over a portion of the line, to New Carlisle and even New Richmond for example," points out Mr. Babin.

Recently, in the Atlantic Provinces, public transport advocates and a few politicians started asking questions about the return of VIA Rail services. Those services have been suspended east of the Quebec City area for close to 17 months now, first because of the railway blockades erected in support of the Wet'suwet'en First Nation between February 10 and March 5, and a week later because of the coronavirus travel constraints.

In the June 8 issue of

Transport Action Atlantic newsletter, that group supporting public transport stated that "perhaps taking a cue from the tight provincial border controls, VIA Rail announced on May 6 that its Ocean service would remain suspended until at least November 1. Beyond some vague references to using the hiatus as an opportunity to upgrade the aging HEP-1 stainless-steel long-distance equipment, VIA offered no real explanation as to why they were going so much farther than any other passenger carriers, and cancelling service nearly six months into the uncharted future."

Transport Action Atlantic also stresses that "when it does return, the (Ocean) train will apparently be very different than before. In a written statement responding to an enquiry from the Moncton Times & Transcript on May 26, the Crown corporation said it was "pleased to announce an operational plan that will allow to continue operating the Ocean without access to the Halterm rail loop." Pressed for further details, VIA declined to answer any of the newspaper's questions. Neither has the company had any apparent engagement on the issue with provincial governments or the municipalities it serves. It is evident, however, that the product will be further downgraded from the already inadequate service offered at the time of the abrupt shutdown on March 13."

### Does VIA Rail want to run trains?

Bernard Babin can hardly understand VIA Rail's lack of flexibility, given the improving COVID-19 context.

"Officially, people with two vaccines can now enter New Brunswick. This is one

▶ Cont'd from cover



Photo: G. Gagné

*The Coalition of Gaspesians for the future of the train members are convinced that VIA Rail must now make a move and bring some services back east of Quebec City.*

less barrier. Gaspesians and New-Brunswickers are getting increasingly impatient about VIA Rail's unwillingness to resume the service. The population needs are still there, for seniors, sick people, students, business people and so on. What are VIA Rail decision-makers waiting for? It looks as if every occasion is good to refrain from running trains," he says.

At the May 27 annual public meeting of VIA Rail, the transporter's management stated that the Montreal-Gaspé train will only return when the Matapedia-Gaspé line will be totally repaired. The former president of VIA Rail, Yves Desjardins-Siciliano, had discretely opened the door to a return in phases when he came to New Richmond in October 2018, New Carlisle being a phase 1.

Bernard Bain says that a return in phases is totally justified. "The service in the Gaspé Peninsula has been suspended since 2013. That is eight years ago. The longer we wait, the harder it will be to regain the clientele. I am worried about the long-term intentions of VIA Rail to come back here, as time passes. The people are adopting other transportation means, the bus to a certain point, aircrafts a little but mainly individual cars, which hardly makes sense over long distances," adds Mr. Babin.

"I repeat that the track will be repaired to New Carlisle at the end of 2022. So, the service must come back to New Carlisle before Gaspé. It could be reinstated to New Richmond sooner, like now! The line was upgraded, the \$22.5 million invested in the

Cascapedia River bridges proves it, the line is safe and the speed is good. There is no facility to turn a train but using two locomotives facing opposite directions would solve that technical problem," he explains.

Bernard Babin followed the May 27 public meeting of VIA Rail Canada online and learned elements he calls "shocking", like the transporter's budgetary figures.

"VIA Rail asks for a budget adjustment of 48% for its 2020 financial year. That would bring its annual budget up to \$415.8 million but 90% of its trains were suspended in 2020. There is something very hard to understand there. It doesn't make sense that we can't get our train back in those circumstances," affirms Mr. Babin.

Bonaventure riding independent Member of the National Assembly Sylvain Roy is also completely frustrated with VIA Rail's decision process.

"VIA Rail is receiving significant grants, money from the government and they are not offering the service. It looks as if they are not taking into account the vaccination state of advancement. Stadiums are opening, air travel is resuming but VIA Rail is not offering the service here! It is bad faith and the federal government must put pressure on the transporter. Train travel is safe, on time and affordable. The people from our region

need it. Summer is started and people could benefit from travelling in sleeper cars. VIA Rail prefers serving its most profitable destinations, despite being a public service. Are they planning the closure of regional services? It is permitted to ask the question," states Mr. Roy.

Bernard Babin has noticed that the Nova Scotia and New Brunswick health authorities are not aligned on the same sanitary constraints lately, which might provide VIA Rail with an occasion to delay the resumption of the Ocean train service.

"Look, it would then be totally relevant to put the train back in place over a Montreal to Moncton route. There is everything needed to turn a train in Moncton and VIA Rail certainly has the financial means to start with a shorter route, considering that corporation's annual grant," he concludes.

The public Corporation simply replied in writing that since the beginning of the health crisis, VIA Rail Canada has been in regular contact with local health authorities.

The transporter stresses that "following recent developments related to sanitary measures in the Atlantic region, we are working to put in place a resumption of service protocol which will be communicated shortly. We will then be able to grant you an interview to discuss it."

▶ Cont'd on page 5