

Quebec's Department of Transport to invest \$314M on the region's roads, railway and airports

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND – The Quebec Department of Transport will invest a total of \$314 million in 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 on the Gaspé Peninsula and Magdalen Islands roads, the peninsula's railway and the region's airports. The amount represents a slight increase of \$6.4 million compared to the sum of \$307.6 million announced in February 2020 for 2020-2021 and 2021-2022.

Transports Québec has announced its regional budgets for two-year periods since 2013. Adjustments are made yearly but those adjustments are difficult to keep track of at times.

Transport Minister François Bonnardel points out that \$107 million will be earmarked for roads and \$68 million for structures, essentially road bridges. The \$107 million is divided in two categories, \$57 million for road surface, mostly asphalt lay-

ing, and \$49 million to make the roads safer through significant adjustments. The total for the roads therefore adds up to \$175 million.

The budget allotted for the Matapedia to Gaspé railway will amount to \$137 million.

A sum of \$2.7 million will go to the airports of the region.

By and large, the amounts are comparable to those announced last year, as the roads received \$169.3 million and the railway, \$138.3 million. There was no new amount for the airports a year ago.

"Since 2018, we have made strong efforts at reducing the backlog of works on our road while maintaining the rest of the network in good shape. (...) We have constantly increased the amounts earmarked for those roads," says Minister Bonnardel, referring to the *Coalition avenir Québec* government.

Jonatan Julien, the minister responsible for the Gaspé



Since November 2016, the windmill blades of LM Wind Power are trucked between the Gaspé plant and New Richmond where they are transferred to rail cars. They are exported to the south of the United States.

Photo: G. Gagné

Peninsula and Magdalen Islands, points out that 55 kilometres of roads will be paved over the next two years, four more than during the period covered by the previous program.

"Rock protection of Highway 132 in the Pic de l'aurore area in Percé, continuing our Highway 132 roadwork

in Chandler so to avoid passing in the inhabited area, and protecting Road 199 in Pointe-aux-Loups, Magdalen Islands will stand high on our list of roadworks," says Minister Julien.

Asked if it is possible to accelerate the work on the Matapedia to Gaspé railway, which is supposed to be fully functional in 2025, François Bonnardel stresses that his government has already cut a year off its initial plan in August 2019, as in April of the same year, the line was supposed to be refurbished over its whole length by 2026.

He leaves little room for further deadline improvement. Mr. Bonnardel had indicated in December 2019 at the rail transport forum in Drummondville that he would like to further advance the opening of the line to Gaspé.

"It is an enormous construction mandate. (...) There are steps to respect, like calls for tenders, environment assessments and construction site monitoring. (...) Rehabilitating 325 kilometres of track within five, six, seven years is colossal," says Mr. Bonnardel.

Gaspé based windmill blade manufacturer LM Wind Power and Port Daniel's McInnis Cement must put in truck trailers bound for New

Richmond the products that must reach their destination by rail. Those products are transferred to rail cars in New Richmond, all this taking place because the line needs repairs between Caplan and Gaspé.

LM has been coping with that constraint since 2016 and McInnis Cement, since 2017. Minister Bonnardel insists that the line refurbishment "will also be a way to bring back the passenger train between Matapedia and Gaspé."

The service east of Caplan was put in a dormant state in 2015 by the Quebec Minister of Transport at the time, Robert Poëti, despite the fact that the Port Daniel cement plant was under construction.

Most cement plants use rail transport to ship out part of their production.

The refurbishment of the whole line is benefiting from a budget of a little over \$300 million. The first major amount, \$100 million, was announced by Transports Québec on May 5, 2017. The federal government added \$45.8 million in August 2019 and Transports Québec added \$135 million in February 2020, to total \$280.8 million. Minister Bonnardel says that the total now exceeds that but he has not provided additional details so far.