

Rail transport promotion group still working hard to get VIA Rail services back to New Carlisle in 2022

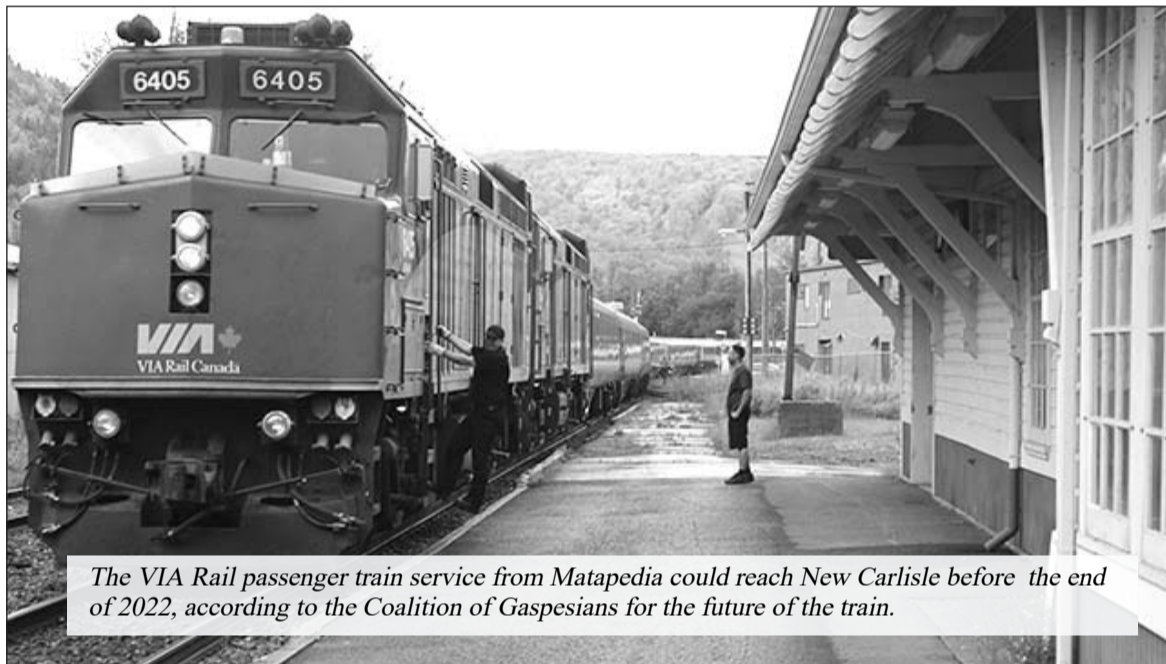
Gilles Gagné

NEW CARLISLE – The Coalition of Gaspésians for the future of the train is still working very hard to bring VIA Rail’s passenger train back to New Carlisle as soon as possible. In fact, that group’s most active members think that the passenger train could resume its service before the end of 2022.

Members of the Coalition of Gaspésians including Barry Brake, Judith Bélanger, Anthony Bernard Prince and Bernard Babin, became quite active over the last month, in preparation for VIA Rail’s annual general meeting which will take place online on May 27.

Using the Facebook page and the coalition’s website, they consulted the public regarding the question or questions that should be asked to the VIA Rail board. It is not the first time that Gaspésians are asking questions to the transporter’s board at the annual meeting but this time around, the consultation was much broader.

“Over the last 28 days, 1,028 people from Canada interacted with us. Also, 50 people from the United States did the same, in addition to Canadians. The anglophone community is very active in that regard. The proportion of women reaches 57%, compared to 43% for men. Most of the people who interacted are aged 55 years and more, and the proportion of people older than 65 is quite significant. By location, people



The VIA Rail passenger train service from Matapédia could reach New Carlisle before the end of 2022, according to the Coalition of Gaspésians for the future of the train.

Photo: Gilles Gagné

based in Gaspé were more numerous, followed by Montreal, Paspébiac, Port Daniel-Gaspés, Percé, New Richmond, Bonaventure, Cascapédia-St-Jules and Ottawa. Needless to say, we also want the passenger train to get back to Gaspé but phase 1 to New Carlisle is a priority. A shuttle service could link New Carlisle to Gaspé between 2022 and 2025, the year the passenger train is supposed to go back to Gaspé,” explains Bernard Babin.

He praises the work of Port Daniel’s Anthony Bernard Prince “for choosing the right words for the question that was retained for the VIA Rail annual meeting, among other things,” adds Mr. Babin.

The question will be: considering that the railway will be operational to as far as Gaspé in 2025, in accordance with the commitment of the Government

of Quebec to meet a condition decreed by VIA Rail, considering that the railway bridges will be totally repaired, that the rails, railway ties and ballast rehabilitated to New Carlisle, that the signage is safe, can VIA Rail confirm its return to New Carlisle by fall 2022.

The question takes into account three conditions imposed by Yves Desjardins-Siciliano, the former president and chief executive officer of VIA Rail in 2016, to the effect that the line must be safe, that a reasonable speed must be maintained along the Gaspé to Matapédia route and that the service must resume over the whole line.

That last condition was modified slightly by Mr. Desjardins-Siciliano after it became evident that reinstating the service to Gaspé would take many years. In 2017, he reiterated that VIA Rail would be ready to

come back to New Carlisle first, as long as a deadline to reach Gaspé would be guaranteed.

“Gaspésians have been able to get answers from VIA Rail over the last annual meetings about the resumption of services in the area but those answers have not always been clear. I am under the impression that VIA Rail might want to wait until the service is restored to Gaspé before coming back at all but we intend to remind the board the commitment of the former president,” explains Mr. Babin.

VIA Rail stopped its service between New Carlisle and Gaspé in December 2011 because of the state of a bridge located in Chandler.

The public transporter suspended the service between Matapédia and New Carlisle in September 2013, again due to the state of some bridges.

Transports Québec owns the

Matapédia-Gaspé line since March 2015. It took two years and two months before that ministry announced a \$100 million line upgrading program. Since then, Transports Québec has announced a \$135 million increment to the line and bridges repairs, while the federal government kicked in \$45.8 million in 2019 for a total budget of \$280.8 million.

Transports Québec has committed to reopening the line between Caplan and Port Daniel before the end of 2022 because of the volume of freight that can be hauled from and to Port Daniel’s cement plant.

Currently, two bridges are undergoing major construction work. The Ruisselet Bridge in Caplan was replaced by a brand new structure over recent months and is days from being completed. The bridge in the centre of Port Daniel is currently being upgraded.

Just east of the Ruisselet structure stands the Ruisseau-Leblanc Bridge, which must also be replaced. Transports Québec spokesperson Nicolas Vigneault says that the call for tenders in that case should be issued soon.

Three other bridges must be upgraded before the line opens between Caplan and Port Daniel. They are located in Bonaventure, Shigawake and Port Daniel, just west of the train station in the latter case. All those bridges will be repaired before the end of 2022, assures Mr. Vigneault.