

Editorial page

Gilles Gagné Commentary



Transport in the Gaspé Peninsula: a need for decentralization

Two months after the start of his term in 2018, Quebec Premier François Legault came to the Gaspé Peninsula a week before Christmas to announce grants totalling \$21.7 million for four airport improvement projects.

He spiced the announcement with a clumsy sentence he seems really talented for. "Even if the Gaspé Peninsula did not vote for the CAQ, we will be your government. We'll make sure it's the last time you don't vote for us!"

It goes without saying, however, that people are served by the government, whether or not they vote for the Coalition avenir Québec. In 2018, outraged by the wind power bashing and the Port-Daniel cement plant critics expressed by Mr. Legault during the electoral campaign, Gaspésians had shunned him and his party.

Since then, the Quebec government has regularly messed up in the Gaspé Peninsula, but also on the North Shore and in the Lower Saint Lawrence regions. The urgent improvement in transport is the gauge of a profound misunderstanding of the reality of these regions by the CAQ. The mess of day care services, the lack of recognition of a housing crisis and the indifference to the demographic balance of the rural regions come close behind but the transportation file comes ahead in the inefficiency standings.

So let's stick to transport: the mess is so thorough that we don't know where to start when presenting the overall picture of the situation! On the water, the woes of the F.-A.-Gauthier ferry between Matane and the North Shore are a drag depriving three regions of a link that should normally

be socially and economically reliable.

The ship's unreliability is attributable to the previous Liberal Party regime's lame decision-making process, as the Société des traversiers du Québec, the province's government owned ferry company, opted for a cheap new ferry instead of a more expensive ship that would have been more efficient and less costly over the long term. The flawed ferry alternatives used during the numerous trips of the F.-A.-Gauthier to the drydock, the purchase of the dangerous Apollo and the ill-suited Saaremaa 1, make the CAQ look bad.

The damage inflicted on Highway 132 on the north side of the Gaspé Peninsula during the storm of December 3 also demonstrates the inability of the public authorities in that sector, which was marked by a similar episode in December 2016.

Transport Minister François Bonnardel can say that the authorities have identified 273 fragile locations in Quebec's maritime regions. Prioritization clearly poses a problem with Transports Québec mostly essentially plugging holes instead of being proactive.

Inaction seems to dominate in air transport. The withdrawal of Air Canada in June 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, certainly required a rapid return to service according to a known model, the private enterprise. However, it is clear that with the constraints of municipally owned airports held on balanced budgets, a private carrier will never make tickets affordable. It will use that excuse to adjust its price to the airport charges.

So, 18 months after Air Canada's departure from Gaspé, a return ticket to Montreal still costs \$1,300, while the \$400 threshold constitutes a barrier to use over medium distances.

There are proven solutions outside Quebec, such as the cooperative model or starting up a public carrier. In the Quebec context, the majority of plane tickets between rural regions and major cities are used by federal, provincial and municipal civil servants.

Consequently, those governments are thus

subsidizing air carriers at a cost of tens of millions of dollars per year, to the detriment of a democratic use of the plane that could come through a call for tenders applied to all those civil servants' tickets. Other citizens could benefit from a call for tenders attempt to get the best ticket price for those tens of thousands of civil servants flying regularly. More people would use air services and carriers would at least cover their expenses and probably make profits.

What justifies the inertia of a government led by a premier who once made a career in aviation? Mystery, but one can think that Mr. Legault, anxious to pass for a man motivated by the results, remains frozen in a known model but ill-suited to the rural regions since the mid-1980s.

However, it is currently rail transport, relatively speaking, that suffers the most from governmental paralysis. In the Gaspé Peninsula, Transports Québec, which acquired the Matapédia-Gaspé line in 2015, is simply not able to maintain an acceptable pace for the repair of these 325 kilometres of rail.

From studies carried out in 2011, it is clear that repairing bridges is the major issue here. In April 2019, François Legault indicated that it would take seven years for the line to be repaired as far as Gaspé. Almost 60% of its length had previously been put into dormancy by the Liberal government in 2015.

Answering to outraged users of the rail who could hardly believe that seven-year delay, the premier corrected the situation in August 2019 by subtracting ... a year. In the defense of the CAQ government, years of repairing bridges were lost between 2015 and 2018. Calls for tenders initiated at the end of 2018 and in 2019 gave hope to Gaspésians, Transports Québec notably committed to reopening the line to Port Daniel by the end of 2022.

Today, nothing is going well. It has been 18 months since a call for tenders was published by Transports Québec for the repair of a single

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bridge between Caplan and Port-Daniel! In November, the ministry said it would take a few months before issuing the next call for tenders. At the current rate, the end of 2022 target will be missed, with a strong financial impact on the Gaspésie Railway Society, the municipal entity operating freight trains. That delivery delay also has a huge impact on regional development east of Caplan, where there is no rail service. Some projects remain mothballed in the meantime.

It has been 10 years, yes 10 years, since VIA Rail passenger trains have operated between New Carlisle and Gaspé, and eight years since the public transporter suspended the service between Matapédia and New Carlisle. The cement from Port-Daniel and the windmill blades from Gaspé are trucked at great expense to a transshipment center in New Richmond, creating unnecessary and costly traffic on Highway 132, which has been damaged.

Of the \$280.8 million available for repairing the Gaspé railroad, \$200 million remains.

At the current rate, costs will explode. The problem stems from the distance, concretely and figuratively, of perception and incomprehension of the stakes existing between the direction of the ministry in Quebec City and the Gaspé Peninsula.

The unnecessary presence of the Bureau québécois des infrastructures increases this repair. The BQI involvement was the idea of Philippe Couillard's government, and it was a very bad one. The BQI is designed to manage huge, multi-billion-dollar initiatives, like the new Samuel de Champlain

Bridge, not a regional railroad.

The improvement of the Gaspé Peninsula railway network consists of a chain of small and medium-sized projects, worth between hundreds or thousands of dollars and \$25 million. The regional management of Transports Québec and the Gaspésie Railway Society have been managing projects of this kind for years. Why not give them these responsibilities, in partnership with reliable contractors, considering the completion of two bridges in record time, a year ago, following the Cascapédia-Saint

Jules flood?

If François Legault is serious in his quest for results, he will choose solutions adapted to regional transport needs. No one is better placed to bring them to fruition than bodies close to the stakes.

However, a problem cannot be solved as long as it is not acknowledged by the authorities and so far, the CAQ has refused to recognize that problem, at the expense of Gaspésians.