

Railway bridges: Transports Québec has not issued a call for tenders in more than 14 months

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PORT DANIEL - For a little over 14 months, the Quebec Ministry of Transport has not published any call for tenders regarding the repair or replacement of railway bridges located between Caplan and Port-Daniel. Four bridges situated between those two municipalities must undergo major work if the ministry is to meet its commitment to reopen the railway to Port-Daniel before the end of 2022.

This situation greatly worries the members of the Coalition of Gaspésians about the return of the train. They fear a domino effect that the Ministry of Transport will not only be forced to postpone the reopening of the Caplan-Port-Daniel stretch of railway, but also the reestablishment of rail service between Port-Daniel and Gaspé scheduled for 2025.

Owner of the Matapédia-Gaspé railway since the spring of 2015, Transports Québec published its last call for tenders for a bridge on June 12, 2020, with a bid closing effective the following July 27. The idea was to replace the Ruisselet bridge in Caplan. Work began in September. This bridge was delivered in advance, in May, by the contractor Hamel Construction.

The repair of bridges is the main challenge associated with the Caplan-Gaspé portion of line, closed since 2015 mainly due to the state of the bridges. That section of the network



Since May, the only bridge under repair or replacement between Matapédia and Gaspé is the Port Daniel structure located in the downtown area..

its activities to the Matapédia-Caplan line portion. Its largest customers in terms of volume are, however, located on the portion requiring repairs. The firms LM Wind Power, which manufactures wind mill blades, and McInnis Cement, have to transport their products at great cost by truck between their plants, located in Gaspé and Port-Daniel respectively, to the rail transshipment centre in New Richmond.

"If we miss the end of 2022 for the return of the railway to Port-Daniel, I fear that this delay will have repercussions on the reopening of the line in Gaspé from 2025 to 2026 or 2027. We have just missed a year's work where we could have made up for the lost time. The calls for tenders were expected to go out in April or May for the four bridges to be repaired between Caplan and Port-Daniel. We were obviously not a priority," criticizes Bernard Babin.

He has not lost all hope of witnessing the reestablishment of train services to Port-Daniel in 2022 and to Gaspé in 2025 because the contractors retained so far to repair or replace the bridges have completed the work before the deadline specified in their contracts.

"We made a good head start with the reconstruction of the Cascapédia-Saint Jules and Ruisselet bridges. But to help entrepreneurs, calls for tenders

represents 60% of the 325 kilometres, or 202 miles, of railway line separating Matapédia and Gaspé. The improvements tied to the Matapédia-Caplan section have been carried out between 2015 and earlier this year.

"We are more than worried. On the part of Transports Québec, there is a lack of respect for the fairness that the people of the Gaspé, as taxpayers, should benefit from. There is an urgent need to renovate the railway, but we do not feel that urgency. These days, we are passing a period of eight years without passenger train service between Matapédia and New Carlisle. Between New Carlisle and Gaspé, it will be 10 years in December," says Bernard Babin of the Coalition of Gaspésians about the return of the train.

"They (Transports Québec decision-makers) should have had a sensitivity, because of those eight years, to put aside some other projects. Gaspésians were not given priority. The Quebec Ministry of Transport, owner of the line since 2015, is fully aware that Gaspésians have been deprived of VIA Rail passenger service for several years. The general situation of passenger transport is deplorable; bus services have been cut back while air services are expensive and not always accessible. There should have been special attention for the Gaspé Peninsula and we can't see it," adds Mr. Babin.

Four bridges require major repairs or replacement between Caplan and Port-Daniel. The Ruisselet-Leblanc bridge, located at the municipal limit between Caplan and

Saint-Siméon, must be replaced. It is roughly equivalent in length to the Ruisselet bridge. The bridge spanning over the Bonaventure River, the long Shigawake trestle and the bridge passing over the Little Port Daniel River must undergo fairly significant repairs, totaling several million dollars.

"If the Ruisselet-Leblanc and Bonaventure bridges were functional, it would be possible to restore VIA Rail service to New Carlisle as a first step, while awaiting the return to Gaspé," indicates Bernard Babin, aware that the federal public carrier remains to convince a return by phases.

The Gaspésie Railway Society, an entity controlled by the municipalities of the region's south coast and operating freight trains on the peninsula network, is limited in

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have to go out," says Mr. Babin.

There is currently only one bridge under repair between Caplan and Gaspé, the one located in the centre of Port-Daniel. It is a major contract, valued at \$14.45 million. The call for tenders in that case was issued on May 29, 2020, and bids were closed on the following July 10. It is expected to be delivered over the spring of 2022.

Nicolas Vigneault, spokesperson for Transports Québec, assures that new calls for tenders will be published before the end of 2021 for the

bridges located between Caplan and Port-Daniel-Gascons. "Even though work is not done on structures, other types of work do take place. In 2021, 15,000 ties (of wood) were changed on the network, for a total of 160,000 ties since the beginning of the repair of this track," he says.

Why hasn't Transports Québec published a call for tenders in more than 14 months for bridges? "You have to do the necessary analyses to prepare the tenders, such as soil and structural analyses. These are jobs that take several months. You have to take the time to do the analyzes in question," says Mr. Vigneault.

Transports Québec has ear-

mark \$235 million in its budget for the total repair of the Matapédia-Gaspé railway. A first amount of \$100 million was announced on May 5, 2017, and another sum of \$135 million was announced at the end of February 2020. An amount of \$45.8 million was also reserved by the federal government, intended to adapt to the challenges of coastal erosion, in August 2019, just before the last electoral campaign.

To date, the railway-related contracts awarded by Transports Québec for the Matapédia to Gaspé line upgrading has amounted to \$80 million since the beginning of 2017, according to Nicolas Vigneault.

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