

VIA Rail postpones until at least November 15 the possibility of increasing train frequency between Montreal and Halifax

O — Gilles Gagné
MATAPEDIA — VIA Rail will not increase the frequency of the Ocean train, linking Montreal and Halifax, until at least November 15. A final decision has not yet been made and the resumption of its full schedule will likely come later. To a certain point, the Ocean train currently serves Gaspésians, who either catch the train or disembark in Matapédia or Campbellton.

The Gaspé-Montréal train was suspended in September 2013 due to the state of some bridges located between Saint-Siméon and Gaspé.

When VIA Rail resumed its service between Montreal and Halifax on August 11, the public transporter was expected to increase its train frequency by the beginning of October, although no specific date was indicated.

On September 2, Transport Action Atlantic, an advocacy group working to improve public transportation in the Maritimes, received a written message from VIA Rail mentioning that the resumption of service to three weekly round trips between Halifax and Montreal would not take place before November 15, without specifying when a decision would be communicated.

So far in September, VIA Rail has not issued a press release pertaining to that delay. The reason given to Transport Action Canada was the COVID pandemic.

“They have pretty flimsy excuses,” points out the president of Transport Action Atlantic, Ted Bartlett, referring to the coronavirus situation, especially considering the COVID-19 numbers shown by the Atlantic provinces at the beginning of September.

“COVID numbers in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia are higher per capita than in Ontario and Quebec at the present time, but it is just a blip. Over weeks, we have a lot fewer cases per capita here than in Quebec and Ontario, where VIA Rail is operating almost a full

schedule. Their excuse doesn’t hold much water,” adds Ted Bartlett.

“In the Toronto-Montreal, Toronto-Ottawa, Ottawa-Montreal and Montreal-Quebec City corridors, VIA Rail is operating according to almost a full pre-COVID level of service,” he insists.

Is VIA Rail experiencing a shortage of rolling material, is it just a lack of consideration for its clientele of Eastern Canada and Eastern Quebec, or is it an attempt to save money? Ted Bartlett thinks that the situation derives in part from those reasons.

“Over the years, VIA Rail has made many decisions without any respect for the travel needs of Atlantic Canadians. It could be an attempt to save money. One of my contacts also tells me that there is a lack of locomotive engineers,” he says.

When, on July 9, VIA Rail announced the resumption of services for August 11, the transporter noted that training sessions were necessary, considering that some employees found work elsewhere during the 17-month hiatus that marked the Montreal-Halifax run between the end of the 2020 winter and the summer of 2021.

In the monthly newsletter published by Transport Action Atlantic, Ted Bartlett wrote about the potential shortage of passenger cars and locomotives.

“Maybe there are equipment challenges. There is only one train set in service at present, and perhaps that is all that VIA has available because their roster of rolling stock overall is in such bad shape. But that one train could easily make two round trips a week, or even five over a two-week span on an adjusted schedule,” he stated in his editorial.

While talking with SPEC, Ted Bartlett stresses that the VIA Rail management seems to forget that the service of the Ocean train in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia was already insufficient.

“Three is better than one weekly train but the needs

are greater than that. We need a daily train,” he affirms.

“I don’t think there is a shortage of demand. Once a week is ridiculous. I went to the Moncton station on September 1 and the crowd was like the peak of Christmas (holidays). The station was bursting at the seams,” adds Mr. Bartlett.

Bernard Babin, of the Coalition of Gaspésians for the return of the train, agrees with the principles defended by Ted Bartlett.

“I find it completely unacceptable that all citizens in the Gaspé Peninsula pay taxes for inadequate services. We are Canadians, as far as I know, like the people of the Atlantic (provinces), and we are entitled to services. Both areas are shortchanged now and it has been the case for a long time,” says Mr. Babin.

The Coalition of Gaspésians for the return of the train is trying to convince VIA Rail that the passenger train can return between Matapédia and New Richmond or Matapédia and New Carlisle before the track is repaired all the way to Gaspé. Recently, the management of VIA Rail pointed out that the service in the Gaspé Peninsula will only come back once the track is refurbished to Gaspé.

Transports Québec is upgrading the track and still maintains that it will be fin-

ished as far east as Port Daniel at the end of 2022, despite the fact that four bridges located in Saint-Siméon, Bonaventure, Shigawake and Port Daniel need thorough upgrading worth tens of millions of dollars altogether.

Between December 2011 and August-September 2013, VIA Rail stopped its passenger train in New Carlisle because a bridge in Chandler needed significant repairs. That period proves the public transporter can operate on a shorter route in the Gaspé Peninsula. The railroad refurbishment is supposed to be completed to Gaspé by 2025.

Bernard Babin can’t help but mention that VIA Rail is receiving large governmental support for a “public entity that seems to avoid running trains at the first occasion. Canadians have contributed to the tune of \$2.3 billion in the five years that spanned between 2016 and 2020 inclusively. That’s a lot of money. In 2020, out of a total grant of \$668.7 million, a chunk of \$415.8 million went to the operations, while VIA hardly ran trains last year! We see that VIA is clearly favouring Central Canada. However, there are not just the (Windsor-Quebec City) corridor services that are necessary for Canadians. People in eastern Canada and eastern Quebec need the services. We

pay taxes too. It is inconceivable that we are treated as second and third class citizens.”

VIA Rail’s public relations department sent a message to the SPEC 24 hours after the newspaper sent questions to the public transporter. The questions, pertaining essentially to the lower level of service offered to Eastern Quebec and Eastern Canada, remain unanswered.

“As you know, due to COVID-19 we have experienced a decrease in ridership (from our pre-pandemic levels). This has led us to always employ a balanced approach to fulfill our public service mandate while managing the financial impacts. In addition, as the health and safety of our passengers and employees has always been our top priority, we have been closely monitoring all developments related to the pandemic - such as the rise of the fourth wave and the delta variant - and measures that all levels of government are putting in place to contain this latest wave. As such, we are being cautious in adjusting our schedule for resuming services. We remain committed to serving communities across Canada and fully restoring our services through our network when conditions permit,” replies VIA Rail.