



VIA Rail will increase its Montreal-Halifax line to two weekly trains in December

Gilles Gagné

MATAPEDIA - VIA Rail Canada announced on October 18 the final phase of its gradual service resumption plan with new frequencies being added beginning in December 2021 and full operations across the country to return by the end of June 2022. The frequency of the Ocean train, which links Montreal and Halifax, will increase from one to two weekly trains in December.

The full service of the Ocean train will only return at the end of June 2022, with a third weekly round trip between Montreal and Halifax being added. That train stops in Matapédia, Quebec, and Campbellton, New Brunswick.

Those two points are used by Gaspésians wishing to use VIA Rail's services despite the suspension of the public transporter's Matapédia to Gaspé line in September 2013.

In December, the Halifax-Montreal train frequency, at 66.6% percent of its regular schedule, will still lag significantly behind the normal services offered in the Quebec City-Windsor corridor, where 85% of its trains will return by December. That corridor also benefits from multi-daily trains, which is far from the case between Montreal and Halifax.

Moreover, the Toronto-Windsor stretch did not bene-



Photo: Gilles Gagné

VIA Rail's second weekly train between Montreal and Matapédia will not be reinstated before December. The third weekly train will only return at the end of June 2022.

fit from a level of service resumption as high as in the Quebec City-Toronto corridor. That situation underrates the resumption percentage of the latter stretch.

In its October 18 announcement, VIA Rail did not provide a schedule tied to the December service improvement. The current service, reinstated on August 11 after a 17-month hiatus, has a train running Sunday and Monday between Montreal and Halifax, and Wednesday and Thursday for the return trip.

So far, VIA Rail has not specified either if, by the end of June, the original schedule in place before March 2020, with departures from Mon-

tréal on Sunday, Wednesday and Friday, will be restored as it was.

In its press release, VIA Rail specifies that its team is currently finalizing details, including access to the infrastructure, and will communicate information such as specific resumption dates as soon as it becomes available.

"Our objective has always been the safe resumption of all our services across the country when conditions allowed it, and we are encouraged to be able to proceed to this final phase of our gradual service resumption plan," expresses Cynthia Garneau, VIA Rail's president and chief executive officer. "We look forward to

welcoming our passengers back on board our trains."

VIA Rail's ridership dropped by more than 95% at the peak of the pandemic and although it is still down from the pre-pandemic levels, the public corporation is now seeing a steady demand.

Bernard Babin, of the Coalition of Gaspésians for the return of the train, thinks that VIA Rail should have resumed the complete service east of Quebec City much faster and should even have considered coming back to

New Richmond, given that the track east of Caplan still requires some work before service resumption to New Carlisle and Gaspé is assured.

"I find that VIA Rail is failing in its responsibilities which were entrusted by the Government of Canada via the Transport Ministry. VIA Rail is responsible for serving all Canadians and between Halifax and Montreal, they do not fulfil the needs. Around a table, when we are invited to a meal, we expect the hosts to serve everybody, even the ones sitting at the end of the table. The citizens of Eastern Canada are still inadequately served and the same reality prevails for Gaspésians living east of Matapédia; they are not well served. It is a breach of VIA Rail's responsibilities," affirms Mr. Babin.

Meanwhile, wearing a mask is required at all times in VIA Rail's stations and on board VIA Rail trains. Passengers who do not wear a mask during their trip will be required to disembark the train or will be refused entry upon boarding. Furthermore, VIA Rail asks that passengers stay informed of public health guidelines and respect those that apply to them and their travel plans, including mandatory vaccination as of October 30.