

## Will the Caplan to Port Daniel rail line be ready in 2022?

Gilles Gagné

CAPLAN - The Quebec Ministry of Transport maintains the hope that the repair of the railroad between Caplan and Port-Daniel can be completed before the end of 2022, however, those following the situation still have concerns considering that more than 17 months have passed since the last call for tenders for this rail line.

The management of Transports Québec and government representatives have been saying all year that more calls for tenders will be published before the end of the year in order to repair the line between Caplan and Port-Daniel before the end of 2022.

Louis-André Bertrand, from the ministry's communications department, responded on November 23 to questions sent by The Gaspé Spec to Transports Québec on November 18. He admits, that "plans and specifications must be completed in the coming months and calls for tenders for construction can then be published."

Taking in to account the comment of the "next few months" a call for tenders before the end of 2021 can be ruled out and a submission of bids postponed to midwinter at best. The authorities at Transports Québec are trying to be reassuring by adding that "this work (on the plans and specifications) is very advanced on the eleven remaining structures to be rehabilitated or rebuilt on the section between Caplan and Port Daniel-Gascons. (...) A very important construction season is planned for 2022."

However, those answers are a concern in the Gaspé Peninsula. A member of the Coalition of Gaspésians for the return of the train, Anthony Bernard Prince, of Port-Daniel, has systematically collected for 10 years all information concerning the evolution of the railway repair file

in the region. He recalls that in the past three years, only three calls for tenders for four bridges have been published by Transports Québec in connection with the Gaspésian railway. One of those bridges remains to be completed.

"The last call for tenders, for the replacement of the Ruisseau Bridge in Caplan, was launched on June 12, 2020. The bidding was closed July 27 and I assume that the contract was awarded not that long after the bids were closed. Work started about mid-September. I have a picture taken on September 24 and, by then, the rails were removed and the old bridge was ready to dismantle. The new bridge was completed in May, in advance by the contractor, Hamel Construction. Here, Transports Quebec is talking about 11 structures," notes Mr. Prince.

Despite the speed of completion of the three bridges' construction and repair mandates entrusted by Transports Québec since the end of 2018, all won by Hamel Construction, he is skeptical about the possibility of seeing 11 contracts carried out between Caplan and Port-Daniel before the end of 2022.

"I am very worried. The delay in the calls for tenders will likely postpone the opening of the railway line east of Caplan. At the Coalition, the initial objective is to bring back the passenger train. The longer the delay, the longer it will take to bring that important passenger train east of Matapédia, the Coalition's initial objective. We will have a lot of work to do too to convince VIA Rail to come back first to New Carlisle in a first step before Gaspé. The way things are going right now, they (the people from Transports Quebec) are dreaming if they believe that the railroad will be back in function at the end of 2022. I would like to see it done but the way things are going, it seems impossi-

ble," concludes Mr. Prince.

Another member of the Coalition of Gaspésians for the return of the train, Bernard Babin, recalls that the five most active members of his group have collectively devoted thousands of volunteer hours over the past eight years to ensure the repair of the track between Matapédia and Gaspé, then the return of VIA Rail's passenger train by the same token. That service has been suspended on this route since September 2013.

"I am extremely disappointed to see that there will be no call for tenders before 2022. The premier of Quebec François Legault and Minister of Transport François Bonnardel have committed to rehabilitating the Caplan-Port-Daniel section before the end of 2022 (...) With the last COP26 in Glasgow and the climate emergency, all the big experts around the world are saying we must reduce green-

### RAIL:

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if it could extend its service eastwards.

"These are big revenues that don't come in for the railroad, since the revenues depend on the tonnage and the distance travelled. There are seven trucks running 24 hours a day between Port-Daniel and New Richmond to load cars that should be in Port Daniel. Other business opportunities are being lost because the railroad is not available east of Caplan. It also worries us about respecting the 2025 reopening target in Gaspé. We are not at a standstill, while waiting for cement and blades, we also have plenty of other projects in the works. Rail is a development tool. The other two MRCs (Percé Rock and Côte-de-Gaspé) have local projects to carry out," emphasizes Éric Dubé.

In May 2017, the Quebec

house gas emissions. Does what happens in British Columbia have to take place in the Gaspé Peninsula before we reach action time? The railways are very significantly reducing greenhouse gases," he says.

The president of the Gaspésie Railway Society and mayor of New Richmond, Éric Dubé, has been taking steps for months to ensure that Transports Québec will meet the 2022 deadline. The Society is a municipal entity that has been operating freight trains on the functional portion of the network since 2007.

"With what we see, what we hear and what does not come out, I am very worried that the schedule will not be respected," he affirms, referring in particular to four important projects to replace a bridge at Ruisseau-Leblanc, and repair those at Bonaventure, Shigawake and the Port-

Daniel bridge located west of the station.

Since Transports Québec acquired the Matapédia-Gaspé rail line in March 2015, rail activities have been limited to the Matapédia-Caplan section of the network, or 40% of the 325 kilometres separating Matapédia and Gaspé.

Since 2016, the growth of LM Wind Power's windmill blade plant in Gaspé and the opening of McInnis Cement in Port-Daniel have tripled the Gaspésie Railway Society rail traffic. However, these two plants are located on the portion put dormant by Transports Quebec in 2015. The blades and cement are transported by truck to the transshipment centre in New Richmond, at great expense. In 2020, the railway company's customers generated 4,202 carloads, a total that would be significantly higher

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government finally decided to repair the Matapédia-Gaspé line section, as the elected officials and socio-economic leaders of the Gaspé had been demanding this repair with vigor since 2014. The governments of Jean Charest and Pauline Marois had previously released funds to initiate improvements made necessary by the age of bridges, some dating back to 1890. The Couillard government granted \$100 million in May 2017.

On the eve of the 2019 election campaign, the federal government added \$45.8 million to the equation, an amount dedicated to mitigating the effects of coastal erosion on the railroad.

In February 2020, Transports Québec released an additional \$135 million for the Gaspé Peninsula railway. In August of this year, the amount invested by this ministry since 2017 was \$80 million.