

Finally action on the Gaspé rail file

Nelson Sergerie

NEW RICHMOND - Activities are accelerating in the repair of the railway line between Caplan and Port-Daniel-Gascons.

While Quebec worked on the engineering aspect behind the scenes, along with 20 months of silence, a cascade of calls for tenders has been launched since February.

In total, nine calls for tender will be launched by the summer if the pace continues with the objective of joining Port-Daniel-Gascons to the network in 2024.

Five calls for bids have already been completed: the contract for the reconstruction of the Ruisseau Leblanc bridge in Caplan and those for the rehabilitation of the Bonaventure and Shigawake River bridges and the replacement of the Castilloux Stream culvert in Port-Daniel-Gascons. Quebec has just launched the call for tenders for the rehabilitation of the bridge over the small Port-Daniel River.

In the case of the Caplan structure, the contract has already been awarded in the amount of \$7.9 million to Construction Polaris CMM.

For the Bonaventure River, only one bidder submitted an offer of \$6.6 million; the same scenario for the Shigawake River with a single proposal at \$9.2 million. For Castilloux Creek, the lowest bid is \$3.1 million. These contracts have not yet been awarded. This

represents the fifth such call since the beginning of the year.

In the coming weeks, other calls for tenders are planned for the replacement of two bridges on Arsenault Stream and a culvert on Church Stream in Caplan and the relocation of the railway line near the cement plant in Port-Daniel-Gascons. In the latter case, a public information session will be held before the start of the work.

"Since the beginning of the year, I have had to say that I am very happy to see the turn it is taking and that it respects the schedule that has been submitted. I am confident that in 2024, we will be in Port-Daniel," rejoices the president of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, Éric Dubé.

On the Port-Daniel-Gascons-Gaspé section, a reassessment of costs and schedule is underway, without once again giving a precise date for reaching the Gaspé terminus.

"I expect that by the end of the year, the ministry will be able to give a date for Gaspé, with a timetable for the work to be done that will be reliable and concrete," hopes Mr. Dubé.

Lebouthillier still wants VIA Rail

At the same time, the return of the VIA Rail train to the Gaspé Peninsula remains a priority for the Member of Parliament for the Gaspé

Peninsula and Magdalen Islands.

In 2016, Diane Lebouthillier had obtained assurances from the former management that the passenger train would go to New Carlisle as soon as the rail is repaired, which is expected in 2024 for the Caplan-Port-Daniel section.

"Especially when you see all the problems we have with air transport. I do not promise the return of the train in 2024, but I can tell you that by 2024, it is certain that I will have had discussions with VIA Rail," confirms Ms. Lebouthillier.

Ottawa has pledged \$46 million to deal with coastal erosion regarding the repairs on the third stretch, the Port-Daniel-Gascons-Gaspé section.

With construction costs soaring, Ms. Lebouthillier is skeptical about increasing the federal government envelope if necessary.

"I will believe it when I see it. We still have 24 kilometres in the erosion zone. I don't know if you saw Pabos sand bank area. I'm not sure I would board a train. We will have to arm ourselves with a lot of patience," says the MP.

So far, Quebec has spent more than \$100 million on rail repairs between Matapédia and Gaspé.

The envelope available, including Ottawa's participation, is \$280 million. Stakeholders all agree that more money will be needed to reach Gaspé.