

## Gaspésie Railway Society to bid on second tourist train *Train could be used as a makeshift solution until VIA Rail returns*

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND – The Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie management intends to make a bid on the locomotives and automotive cars of the Orford Express, a tourist train that previously operated in the Eastern Townships before the pandemic.

The Orford Express equipment has been up for sale for several months. The shareholders of the train announced the closure of their operations in October 2020.

Luc Lévesque, director general of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie (Gaspésie Railway Society), is not disclosing the amount of money the company is ready to pay for the Orford Express material but he thinks the chances are good of making an acquisition.

According to Mr. Lévesque, the rolling material is interesting and could be used for several purposes by the Gaspésie Railway Society.

“There are two Budd (automotive) cars and two locomotives, namely a road switcher and a passenger train locomotive. The two Budd cars are interesting because their operation is affordable. Not everybody wants Budd cars but, in our case, they could be handy. The road switcher has 2,000 horsepower and we could use it for our freight operations,” points out Mr. Lévesque.

The Orford Express owners have not set a transaction date. They are welcoming offers and also making proposals in order to determine a price range.

“I understand that the (rolling) material will likely be sold before the winter. It is stored outside on a siding in Sherbrooke. I am assessing the relevance, the cost and our interest in this kind of acquisition,” says Mr. Lévesque.

The Gaspésie Railway Society already owns a tourist train, the Amiral, stranded in Gaspé since the summer of 2014. It was mainly used between Gaspé and Percé for cruise ship passengers, a service that started slowly in 2013 before getting more popular the following year.

The 2015 closure of the line east of Caplan, a move made by Quebec’s Department of Transport, had put an end to the Amiral service.



The Orford Express operated for over 14 years in the Eastern Townships.

Photo: Orford Express

Transports Québec had just acquired the line because of the financial difficulties of the Gaspésie Railway Society, a municipal entity.

Without giving too many details about the state of the Amiral passenger cars, Luc Lévesque has doubts about an affordable way to put them back in service, given the uncertainty regarding the resumption of traffic west of Gaspé. The line is under repair, mainly the bridge, but no time schedule has been announced for the section between Port Daniel and Gaspé. “It will be very costly to put them back in service, after more than eight years of inactivity. There is also no locomotive in Gaspé at the present time and bringing one back there if the line is not wholly repaired is almost not feasible in the current context of a closed railway,” he says.

The locomotive used for the Amiral, Unit 1849, was moved out of Gaspé five years ago, in parts. The locomotive was put back together in New Richmond but it had to be repaired, mechanically and electronically, at the Canadian National shop in Campbellton. Such a move in the other direction would be very complicated and costly. Would the locomotive be kept in a single piece or in parts? “There is no railway shop in Gaspé,” points out Luc Lévesque.

**Passenger service could be brought back**

The two Budd cars of the Orford Express could replace the Amiral train in Percé once the line is reopened east of Caplan or even west of Ca-

people are hard to reach. As for Transports Québec, they are aware of my thoughts and they are not closed to the idea. We sure want to use that train and bring back the passenger train. Connecting it with VIA Rail’s train is an option,” explains Mr. Lévesque.

A passenger service would have to receive public funding in order to work. “I haven’t dug into that much. In my mind, VIA Rail would have to contribute, or another public body. I don’t know if there is a precedent in that kind of service, if VIA Rail has contributed elsewhere to something similar,” says Luc Lévesque.

The main operation of the Orford Express included a dome car. That unit has already been sold in the United States for an undisclosed amount. Some rumours mention that the transaction price was close to US\$800,000.

The Orford Express operated for over 14 years in the Eastern Townships. Donald Thompson, a priest, was the main promoter, along with businessman André L’Espérance.

A very popular television show aired by Radio-Canada, “On prend toujours un train,” a reference to a well-known French song, was filmed on that train. The show host mainly interviewed people who had experienced serious difficulties in their life, as the train symbolizes confidence.

service would only come back once the service is re-established between Matapédia and Gaspé.

“We don’t know what VIA Rail will do. Will VIA Rail come back once the line is reopened over its whole length or on a section of the line? We don’t know. However, Gaspésians need a service now. Our Budd cars could surely be used to connect with the Halifax to Montreal train,” suggests Luc Lévesque.

He has not initiated lengthy talks about the possible use of Budd cars to allow Gaspésians to have access to a passenger train service.

“I have briefly talked to Daniel Côté (president of the RÉGIM, the region’s commuter bus service) but I have not talked to VIA Rail. Their