



Keen interest to participate in the upgrading of the Gaspé Peninsula line between Port Daniel and Gaspé

● GILLES GAGNÉ

PORT DANIEL – Twelve contractors from all over Quebec have expressed interest in submitting bids for the refurbishment of the Gaspé Peninsula railroad between Port Daniel and Gaspé, following the November 11 publication of a call for interest published by the Quebec department of Transport.

Upon the December 5 deadline of the call for interest, 12 contractors had communicated with Transports Québec. The list is not published by the ministry. A recent Transports Québec estimate of the potential cost of repairing the line between Port Daniel and Gaspé refers to a sum of about \$350 million.

So far, Transports Québec only says that the contracts awarded since 2017 amount to more than \$100 million. The ministry has not sent an exhaustive list of those contracts to the media despite several requests.

The president of the Gaspésie Railway Society, Éric Dubé, was confident to see many companies answer the call for interest issued by Transports Québec in November, because there is a fair amount of money earmarked for the work. However, there are interesting contracts everywhere in Quebec, a factor that could have

reduced the interest for submitting bids in the region.

“It is a good sign. There is a lot of work to carry out here. There are 21 bridges to fix or replace between Port Daniel and Gaspé,” points out Mr. Dubé.

Transports Québec has accelerated the pace of contract awarding since March 2022, after going 20 months without running a call for tenders for the most important aspect of the line refurbishment, the upgrading of bridges. The ministry did not issue a single call for bids between June 2020 and the end of February 2022.

After committing to opening the line between Caplan and Port Daniel at one point in 2022, without releasing a date, Transports Québec’s authorities admitted at the end of February 2022 that the re-opening of that section would not occur before 2024, again without specifying a date.

Contractors usually deliver ahead of schedule

Now, Éric Dubé thinks that servicing the Port Daniel cement plant could be feasible at the end of 2023 or early in 2024.

“All the repair contracts linked to the bridges located between Caplan and Port Daniel have been awarded. Most of them are underway. Work has not started on the

Shigawake trestle but the contractor has built the access road,” he explains.

Éric Dubé is also encouraged by the fact that since 2018, “all the mandates awarded to private contractors were delivered ahead of schedule.”

For example, the new Cascapédia-St-Jules bridges were functional six months ahead of schedule, in December 2020. Caplan’s Ruisseau bridge was also delivered four months before the tender’s deadline.

Groupe Sema, of Mont-Joli, won the bids for the Bonaventure River bridge and the Shigawake trestle. Moreover, Groupe Gilbert, the contractor that submitted the lowest bid to move to the north the main line situated east of the Saint Mary’s Cement plant in Port Daniel, has committed to finish the work in July 2023.

“Moving the line for July 2023 is not the main element regarding the cement plant service because we will not send trains east of that plant next year. The important element for us in the short term is that the contractor will also build the rail yard servicing the cement plant for July 2023. So, if the rest of the line is ready between Caplan and the cement plant before the end of 2023, we will send trains there,” adds Éric Dubé.

There are smaller con-

tracts that remain to be awarded between Caplan and Port Daniel, notably for the replacement of a culvert in Caplan and the building of retaining walls, possibly in Caplan and Paspebiac.

“The Caplan culvert is 14 feet in length and the contract will be awarded following a call for tenders. You don’t find a 14-foot concrete culvert on the shelf of a hardware store. As for the retaining walls, we will do it with our working crew at the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie. The budget will come from the \$19 million agreement that we just signed with Transports Québec. It is made for that kind of work,” stresses Mr. Dubé.

The Gaspé Peninsula line covers 202.4 miles, or 325 kilometres between Matapédia and Gaspé. It was acquired in 2015 by Quebec’s department of Quebec after the Gaspésie Railway Society experienced financial difficulties and filed for the protection of the court because of a \$3.5 million debt.

The same year, then Transport Minister, Robert Poëti decided to put the line east of Caplan in dormancy because he and his ministry’s civil servants thought that there was not enough traffic between Caplan and Gaspé to justify maintaining the line active. At the same time, the Port Daniel cement plant was under construction. It opened

in 2017 and it is now the biggest source of revenues for the Gaspésie Railway Society, which hauls cement between New Richmond and Matapédia. That cement has to be trucked to New Richmond.

Also in 2015, Gaspé-based LM Windpower was showing interest to use the railway to export its windmill blades. Between the end of 2016 and May 2022, those blades also had to be trucked to New Richmond to be put on flat cars, at a significant transfer cost for LM’s customers.

Between 2015 and 2020, no work was carried out on the bridges east of Caplan to resume traffic generated by the cement plant as soon as possible.

In May 2017, then Quebec Liberal Premier Philippe Couillard came to New Carlisle to announce a \$100 million envelope to repair the line over its whole length.

In February 2020, the CAQ government added \$135 million to the envelope earmarked for the upgrading of the line. It followed an August 2019 announcement made by the federal government to the effect of adding \$45.8 million for the refurbishment of the line along the areas affected by coastal erosion. That federal money is used by the Quebec government to its discretion