

MTQ opts for regrouped calls for tenders between Port Daniel and Gaspé, if there is interest *The measure could accelerate works*

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NEW RICHMOND – Quebec's Minister of Transport and Sustainable Mobility, Geneviève Guilbault, recently announced the publication of a call for interest as part of the rehabilitation project of the Gaspé Peninsula railway for the section between Port-Daniel and Gaspé.

This call for interest will provide information on the rail sector in the region in order to accelerate the completion of future work. Since the beginning of 2022, there is no longer a delivery schedule for that section of railway.

At the end of February, Transports Québec announced that the delay of delivery for the Caplan to Port Daniel portion of the network would be postponed from the end of 2022 to 2024, without further information about the time slot of 2024. Between June 2020 and February 2022, the ministry went 20 months without a call for tenders along that line.



Photo: G. Gagné

A lot of work remains to be done on the railway bridges, however, all contractors have delivered their work ahead of schedule since 2017. "Regrouping calls for tenders could be a way to save time," says Éric Dubé.

In a press release, Minister Guilbault states that "the return of the railway is eagerly awaited by the population of the region and we are working on it! The call for interest that we are launching today demonstrates our government's desire to rehabilitate the railway in the Gaspé Peninsula as quickly as

possible. Today we are taking another step towards the full commissioning of the railway for the benefit of the entire region."

The president of the Gaspésie Railway Society, Éric Dubé, feels that the call for interest can accelerate the pace of railroad works between Port

Daniel and Gaspé.

"From what I understand, the ministry is checking the interest of consultants and contractors in order to award bigger contracts through including several projects in the same call for tenders. It could work by sections. So a contractor would be in charge of a sec-

tion and come with a bigger crew. Instead of publishing 20 calls for tenders, it could be reduced to a smaller number. It could accelerate the pace for sure," explains Mr. Dubé.

He stresses that a contractor coming for a few bridges instead of one will save money because it will avoid demobilizing the workers through staying longer instead of coming several times for smaller jobs.

"We find it's good news. If Transports Québec can find a few contractors, like four for example, bidding on the same larger calls for tenders, it will proceed. It can be interesting for contractors to bid on a contract of \$50 million instead of bidding on \$10 million. If there is only one bidder because there is a shortage of contractors everywhere, the ministry will stick to the current way of doing things," adds Mr. Dubé. "The government machine is ready now. They (Transports Québec employees) will make

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sure before Christmas that the budgetary envelopes are earmarked for the future contracts. We should also have a better idea of the total cost in March, and a delivery schedule," points out the president of the Gaspésie Railway Society, an entity under the municipal control of the four MRCs covering the territory between Matapédia and Gaspé.

A first glance evaluation made by Transports Québec recently is giving a general idea of the tab expected to repair the line between Port Daniel and Gaspé. It could take between \$248 million and \$355 million.

Slow progress since 2017

The decision to repair the line between Caplan and Gaspé was made public in May 2017, two years and two months after Transports Québec, upon acquiring the network between Matapédia and Gaspé, decided to close 60% of it.

Significant bridge and track repairs were carried out from Matapédia to Caplan between 2019 and 2022 but not a single additional mile of track has been made available to the transporter, the Gaspésie Railway Society, since May 2017.

Transports Québec is not releasing accurate updates on the money that has been invested so far in the refurbishment of the line, except to say that it exceeds \$100 million. Work is underway between Caplan and Port Daniel, essentially on the bridges of Ruisseau-Leblanc, at the limit of Caplan and Saint-Siméon, Bonaventure River, Shigawake and Port Daniel, just west of the station.

Between Port Daniel and Gaspé, 21 bridges of various sizes need work, sometimes replacements. Four retaining walls have to be repaired and one more has to be built, according to recent documentation released by Transports Québec. Two faults also need repairs. Smaller infrastructures like culverts and small wooden bridges have to be replaced. Some track work and ballast spreading have already taken place between Caplan and Gaspé.

Business study shouldn't pose a problem

"Transports Québec always carries out a business opportunity study before undertaking officially thorough bridge repairs on a section of railway. It will also be the case between Port-Daniel and Gaspé," says Éric Dubé.

"They have to do it but I am not worried about the outcome. They did it for the Matapédia to Caplan and Caplan to Port Daniel portions of the network. There is potential along the section leading to Gaspé," he notes.

In fact, until May, the biggest revenue source of the Gaspésie Railway Society was LM Windpower, the Gaspé-based windmill blade manufacturer. Even if the company will rely on ships for three years to deliver to the United States its giant blades from the spring of 2023 and on, chances are that blades will eventually leave the region by train in the future.

There is also significant input used by LM that could come by rail. Other projects will also need the railway between Port Daniel and Gaspé. Between November 2019 and May 2022, the blades of LM were trucked to a transshipment location in New Richmond in order to be loaded on railway flatcars and exported to the United States.

The mayor of Gaspé, Daniel Côté, who has repeatedly asked for a faster delivery schedule since his town has been deprived of railway services since 2015 inclusively, thinks the line will likely not be reopened along its whole length before 2028, and maybe not until 2030.

"I have full confidence that the money is secure. Both politicians and administrators have repeatedly confirmed to us that the goal is to restore the rail to Gaspé and the bill is not an obstacle. In fact, they know that the longer they delay, the more the costs increase and the more the work becomes more complex with the erosion and oxidation of the components. So to lower the costs, they must go as quickly as possible. They have human resource constraints, in this context of manpower shortage, particularly in the field of railway engineering. On our side, we continue to push, but we are also realistic in the face of the scale of the challenges," he comments.