

More time needed to resume talks with Orford Express train owners

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NEW RICHMOND – The director general of the Gaspésie Railway Society, Luc Lévesque, is still reflecting on the possibility of the transporter acquiring some of the equipment owned by Orford Express, the company that operated a tourist train for 14 years in the Eastern Townships.

Mr. Lévesque went to see the Orford Express equipment at the end of the spring, however, other issues filled his working schedule over recent months, he says. Besides, the Gaspésie Railway Society is still reflecting on the possible development of certain files, including VIA Rail's projects for the Gaspé Peninsula.

"We haven't progressed much. We haven't made a move. It is not dead. I must talk soon to Élise (L'Espérance, a member of the family that owns the company Orford Ex-



Photo: Orford Express website

The material of the Orford Express is now waiting to be sold on a siding in Magog. The operations of that train occurred in 2020

press). We still have to reflect on the potential of that material. VIA Rail is taking delivery of new cars. It is not easy to talk to the VIA Rail people," explains Mr. Lévesque.

The available material of the Orford Express train consists of two Budd automotive

cars and two locomotives, that is to say a road switcher and a passenger train locomotive. In June, Mr. Lévesque was saying that the two Budd cars were interesting because of the affordability of their operation. The road switcher has 2,000 horsepower and it could be used for freight service in the Gaspé Peninsula.

He says that the material could be wholly acquired but also in part as some elements are more interesting than others.

"It is all about priorities. Do we have money to invest in that material? Through losing the windmill blades trains in May, we lost millions of dollars in annual transport revenues. We knew that there would be an end in 2022. It just arrived ear-

lier than expected. However, we must make up our mind on a number of issues. The return of a passenger train service for Gaspésians is one," adds Luc Lévesque.

The return of VIA Rail sure represents the fastest option as far as the passenger service is concerned. However, VIA Rail remains vague about the return scenarios, time wise and frequency wise.

"We are aware that putting up another passenger transporter in the Quebec regions would take time and money. Right now, we don't have a lot of wiggle room to spend time and money on that option," says Mr. Lévesque.

The Budd automotive cars could be used as a lever to accelerate the return of VIA Rail, or for the eventual resumption of the Amiral tourist train, once the line is repaired all the way to Gaspé, he adds. Repairing the Amiral train cars stranded in Gaspé since the fall of 2014 will likely be more costly than the acquisition cost of the two Budd cars, if their price is reasonable. Luc Lévesque points out that a decision about the Amiral train will not be made soon.

More woodchip cars put in service

Meanwhile, the Gaspésie Railway Society will soon put back in service 12 of the 20

woodchip cars acquired in the summer of 2020 from BC Rail, a subsidiary of Canadian National (CN). Those freight cars were acquired for a cheap price, basically the transportation cost to send them to the Gaspé Peninsula from British Columbia.

Those cars will join the 32 cars acquired in the United States by the Gaspésie Railway Society since 2017 for the hauling of wood chips between the Nouvelle sawmill and the Rivière-du-Loup newsprint mill.

"We need CN to deliver the wood chip cars to Rivière-du-Loup, from the interchange point we have in Matapédia. CN has been cancelling trains and experienced a shortage of staff recently, so the turnaround of cars has not been fast enough to satisfy the needs of our customers," explains Mr. Lévesque.

The Gaspésie Railway Society resumed the hauling of wood chips on the region's line in 2009, following an agreement signed between the owner of the Nouvelle sawmill at the time, Temrex, and White Birch Paper, which owns the Rivière-du-Loup paper mill. Groupe Lebel is the owner of the Nouvelle sawmill since April 2021.

The woodchip cars used between 2009 and 2017 belonged to CN, which notified the Gaspésie Railway Society in 2016 that those cars were to be transferred to another service.



Photo: G. Gagné

The woodchip cars acquired from BC Rail in 2020 will soon be put in service.