

Postponement of the deadline for the railway repairs: CAQ forgot about the Gaspé Peninsula and must now help the Gaspésie Railway Society

Nelson Sergerie,
LJI Journalist

Gilles Gagné

CARLETON-SUR-MER/
GASPÉ: The Parti Québécois candidate in the Bonaventure riding, Alexis Deschênes, is criticizing the lack of seriousness, competence and political will on the part of François Legault's Coalition avenir Québec (CAQ) government in the rehabilitation work of the railway between Matapédia and Gaspé.

"When a premier of Quebec commits to a deadline, he and his government have the responsibility to take the necessary means to deliver, however, despite Mr. Legault's commitment in August 2019 that rail repairs be completed up to Gaspé for 2025, we note with disappointment and anger that the CAQ did not allocate the means necessary to honour their promise," says Alexis Deschênes.

"The recent announcement of the two-year postponement of the schedule for the commissioning of the Caplan-Port-Daniel-Gascons section represents an already too long wait for Gaspésians. Remember that there has been no more passenger service on the network since 2013," adds the Parti Québécois candidate.

After meeting with the president of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, Éric Dubé, Mr. Deschênes notes that this postponement will affect the finances of the company under municipal control.

"The Société de chemin de fer had planned to reach Port-Daniel in 2022, as promised by the government. The postponement of the service in this section will deprive the company of new revenues. We claim that the government should increase the Société's subsidy accordingly to ensure that it can maintain its operations and employees until the work is completed," concludes Alexis Deschênes.

On November 18, 2021, he and the Member of the National Assembly for the Magdalen Islands, Joël Arseneau, who is also the PQ's parliamentary leader and transport critic had already expressed their worry through denouncing the fact that no call for tenders had then been launched in more than 16 months even though the funds are available. That period has now reached 20 months.

"In Quebec, being able to get around efficiently, and being able to count on reliable



Photo: G. Gagné

The last bridge repaired or replaced east of New Richmond was the Ruisselet Bridge in Caplan. The call for tenders was issued on June 12, 2020, and the bridge was completed in May 2021. Next to the east, the Ruisseau-Leblanc Bridge must also be replaced. It is located in a much more spacious area but no call for tenders has been issued in that case yet.

services, is essential. The regions, their populations, their recovery and their economic development depend on it. However, for four years, citizens of the regions, the Magdalen Islands, the Gaspé Peninsula, but also the North Shore and Abitibi, among others, pay the price for the general inaction of the CAQ government in terms of public regional transport. This government obviously understands neither the stake nor its importance as a lever for socioeconomic development. By postponing indefinitely the return of the train to an important part of the Gaspé Peninsula, the government has also just demonstrated eloquently that mobility in the regions and between regions is far, very far from being a priority. It is the same government that has committed to a sod turning ceremony for the Quebec City-Lévis tunnel starting this year! We at the Parti Québécois will not abandon our citizens like that," declared Joel Arseneau.

His colleague from Gaspé, Méganne Perry Mélançon, isn't pleased with the aspect of no longer having a deadline for rail repairs between Port Daniel and Gaspé.

"It shows that we are not even sure of having a train for Gaspé. Is there a cost overrun and the government does not want to add money to the project? I am outraged. It is a shame to see that the govern-

ment is once again abandoning the regions," said the Member of the National Assembly on February 4, the day after the announcement.

Like candidate Alexis Deschênes, Ms. Perry Mélançon points out that Quebec will have to grant assistance to the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie. The transport of cement costs the railway transporter \$2.5 million annually, she said, which represents \$5 million over the next two years. "The government will have to be there to support it financially," says Ms. Perry Mélançon.

In Bonaventure, MNA Sylvain Roy said the news was like "a cold shower" weakening the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie.

"It makes people happy. It consolidates road transport. We have trucking companies that will continue to transship. Bad news for the future of economic development," says the MNA with irony.

The two elected officials do not hesitate to make a correlation between the billions of dollars involved with the CAQ government's third link between Quebec and Lévis. That project will cost at least ten billion dollars, according to preliminary studies, and the daily clientele would amount to only 10,000 users.

"When we talk about labour shortages... I can't believe that's the issue that makes us arrive more on time. The shortage

end of the construction project.

It was an ill-fated blow because Premier François Legault remained seated, leaving the floor to his Minister of Transport.

In a supplementary question, the MNA for Gaspé repeated the words of her parliamentary leader, repeating the words of the minister to the effect that everything was fine in December.

"What is the word of the CAQ and its commitments to the regions worth?" asked the MNA. "Our word is important," replied Minister Bonnardel.

"On section two (Caplan to Port Daniel), we have to replace a dozen bridges. It doesn't happen by snapping your fingers. Unfortunately, the teams have seen particular situations that lead us to make a decision that is not obvious. Bringing passenger transport back to Gaspé is important. Now, we have to take the time to do things the right way," replied the minister.

The ministry has promised that calls for tenders would be published by the end of the winter, including four in the coming weeks.

The projects target the reconstruction of the structure in Caplan-Saint-Siméon and rehabilitation work on the Bonaventure, Shigawake and Petite Rivière Port-Daniel bridges.

In total, nine infrastructures will be targeted by calls for tenders by the summer on the Caplan to Port-Daniel-Gascons section.