

Editorial page

Gilles Gagné Commentary

Railway refurbishment, an embarrassing failure

It has been in the writing since the fall, and maybe before. In October, Transports Québec had gone 16 months without issuing a call for tenders pertaining to the repair or replacement of one of the four main railway bridges located between Caplan and Port Daniel's cement plant.

Sixteen months, for a ministry supposed to have understood that repairing the Matapedia to Gaspé line is front and centre in reopening the railway, is a lot of time.

On February 3, at 5:30 p.m., the Transports Québec ministry issued a press release to specify that the planning of the Caplan to Port Daniel stretch would take longer than expected and reopening, originally scheduled for the end of 2022, would be postponed by two years.

Two years! Less than two months ago, the communication branch of Transports Québec assured journalists, and the public, that the ministry's staff was still dedicated to reopening the Caplan to Port Daniel portion of the line, and that it remained feasible. The project of reopening the Port Daniel to Gaspé part was still scheduled for 2025, as promised by Premier François Legault in August 2019. Now, there's no longer a delivery schedule.

Less than seven weeks after Transports Québec stated that the 2022 goal was still reachable, a delay of two years is announced. If that is not taking people for fools, what can it be?

Keep in mind that competent people, endowed with a decent call for tender results, as of February 2022, would be able to realize before the end of the current year the refurbishment or replacement of the four

bridges that pose a problem. In fact, the contractor that has so far won all the bridge replacement contracts, Hamel Construction or its CRT Construction subsidiary, has delivered two previous important mandates months way ahead of time. Two of those bridges are situated in Cascapedia-St-Jules and one in Caplan.

Another bridge, located in Port Daniel, will be repaired later this year, before the end of 2022.

So, the problem lies elsewhere. In 20 months, the Transports Québec technical and engineering team was not able to complete the plans and specifications of either the Ruisseau-Leblanc Bridge, the Shigawake trestle and the bridge spanning over the Little Port Daniel River. Those bridges need refurbishment, not replacement.

In fact, Transports Québec could have prepared those four bridges' plans and specifications before June 12, 2020, the last date a bridge call for tenders was issued, considering it was decided on May 5, 2017 that the whole Matapedia-Gaspé line would be saved and put back in working order.

There is very little track work competence in the offices of Transports Québec in Quebec City. The rail transport division of that ministry was a very small branch in 2017 and it hasn't grown much over the last five years. In fact, it has somewhat grown but the staff rotation is very high, the rail experience of those hired varies from nil to moderate, and there is no feeling of emergency at the helm of that department.

In that context, emergency means considering the economic and social importance of bringing back the train service in an area, the Caplan to Gaspé section of railroad, that has been deprived of it since 2011, in the case of the New Carlisle to Gaspé case, and since 2015 for the Caplan to New Carlisle stretch.

Emergency also means respecting the people of a region that has slowly but surely recovered from a series of economic woes that hampered its development, mainly between 1992 and 2005, from the cod crisis to the closure of the linerboard mill in New Richmond, including the closures of Murdochville mining activities and Chandler's Gaspesia paper mill.

Emergency means taking into account the imple-

mentation of more efficient transportation means for the Gaspé Peninsula's two main industrial plants, LM Wind Power in Gaspé and Votorantim Cimentos in Port Daniel. The two firms are currently forced to haul their output by truck, at a much higher cost, to the nearest road-rail transshipment centre in New Richmond.

Emergency means respecting the management of the Gaspésie Railway Society, whose members have accomplished small miracles since 2015 to cope with former Quebec Transport Minister Robert Poëti's then ridiculous decision to put the Caplan-Gaspé in a dormant state. At that time, the Port Daniel plant was under construction and no facility producing in excess of one million tonnes of cement annually goes without rail service, all the more when a railway passes through the plant! The imagination deployed by the Gaspésie Railway Society's team since 2014 has been and remains remarkable, given all the hurdles deriving from Transports Québec's redoubtable inefficiency.

Some civil servants don't thrive on added responsibilities. Most of the people managing Transports Québec's rail division fall into that category. What happened in Beauce illustrates that statement. The former owner of the Quebec Central Railway experienced financial difficulties and the line was acquired by Transports Québec more than a decade ago. Despite a study showing that there was considerable potential between Charny and Lac-Frontière, along the Maine border, Robert Poëti opted in 2015 for the dismantlement of two-thirds of the line!

That same year, Transports Québec acquired for a paltry sum the Matapedia to Gaspé line from the Gaspésie Railway Society, as that municipal entity didn't have the capacity to maintain the line and its numerous bridges, given that the rehabilitation program put up by the previous governments of Jean Charest and Pauline Marois had been phased out with the election of Philippe Couillard in April 2014.

As specified before, Robert Poëti, a highly incompetent Transport Minister in a government obsessed with austerity measures, decided, following the advice

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of highly apathetic rail division civil servants, put the Caplan to Gaspé stretch of railway in a dormant state. Like in Beauce, this part represents roughly two-thirds of the whole line. The purpose was clear; he and his staff were talking about turning that part of the railroad into a cycling path. That possibility was expressed at the beginning of March 2015.

However, the socio-economic leaders of the Gaspé Peninsula knew the value of a functional railway and, despite occasional divisions regarding the order of priority between the passenger train, the freight service and the Amiral tourist train, they always advocated for a full refurbishment of the line. The Couillard government surrendered to that option on May 5, 2017.

One of today's problems comes from the fact that some

of the Transports Québec civil servants never accepted that outcome, as if serving the population is not the utmost principle to defend when you work for the public.

It leaves us with the current situation, with civil servants dragging their feet over the refurbishment of the most important spots of the railway, using erosion to justify the two-year delay of the line reopening between Caplan and Port Daniel while it is a non-existent problem in the short term.

It leaves us with \$100 million spent since 2017 and not a single mile of functional railway added to the line used by the Gaspésie Railway Society, which remained the freight transporter after losing the property of the railroad in 2015. It leaves us with important projects of traffic expansion that are postponed and that might be abandoned by 2024, as freight shippers will find other trans-

portation solutions.

It leaves us with a VIA Rail passenger train service that will be harder to relaunch, as people also opt for other solutions. For now, other affordable options are not common in the Gaspé Peninsula.

It leaves us with the understanding that current Transport Minister François Bonnardel is obviously a weak member of Premier François Legault's cabinet because, otherwise, he would have solved the Gaspé Peninsula railway line problem upon his nomination in October 2018.

It leaves us with the thought that the Coalition avenir Québec government representatives talk a lot about how nice the Gaspé Peninsula is, but about six months from the official start of the next electoral campaign, the population of the region might consider that this government has really failed to deliver.