

Editorial section



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Commentary

Time to shake up the VIA Rail mode

The electoral campaign that just ended was characterized by a number of interventions regarding the eventual return of train services between Caplan and Gaspé. On many occasions references were made about the resumption of VIA Rail's service in the Gaspé Peninsula.

It was a Quebec election and VIA Rail is a public corporation owned by the Canadian government, however, Quebecers pay taxes in Ottawa and putting our nose in VIA Rail affairs is minding our own business since we, citizens living in rural regions, are paying taxes and getting shortchanged in that category of transport service.

Overall, the management of VIA Rail has been so lame, so negligent and so disconnected from the reality of Gaspésians that it is permitted to think of another way of getting passenger rail services. It is also true that the federal government's ignorance and lack of vision pertaining to transport issues in Canada, notably through failing to give VIA Rail proper funding, has all but hampered the potential to move people between the country's areas.

The huge service cuts applied by VIA Rail in January 1990 have deprived many areas of passenger trains. In the Gaspé Peninsula, we were able to keep our train three times per week instead of a daily service.

If Canada's deficit was a big cause of worry around the beginning of the 1990s and for a few years after that the last 25 years have provided a much brighter picture, budgetwise.

So why are rural regions not getting better service from VIA Rail? Why isn't the federal government taking the measures to propel Canada into modernity, transport-wise?

The passenger train service has been suspended since September 2013 between New Carlisle and Matapédia, and since December 2011 between New Carlisle and Gaspé. It was not abolished. It was suspended, officially, because of the state of the tracks and bridges. The Lac-Mégantic tragedy instilled a lot of fear in the transportation world and the state of the Gaspé Peninsula railway provided a good excuse to the people who were expressing bad faith about the relevance of our service.

Normally, the budget earmarked for the Gaspé Peninsula service was not phased out. It was probably used somewhere else, but there is still an item somewhere in VIA Rail's spreadsheet that reads "Montreal-Gaspé train" without an amount in it.

Wouldn't it be normal, considering the savings that VIA Rail made through not offering a service east of Matapédia for nine years, to get at least the passenger train back to New Richmond now, and New Carlisle as soon as the line is fit there.

The VIA Rail management has sent confusing messages regarding the Gaspé Peninsula over re-

cent years. The former chief executive officer, Yves Desjardins-Siciliano, was open to bringing the train back in phases, New Carlisle being phase 1, and to Gaspé next. His replacement, Cynthia Garneau, was imposing another constraint the train will only be back once the line is fit in Gaspé. That option is like abandoning the mandate that is written in the law that was approved to create VIA Rail.

Technically, it is possible to send a train to New Richmond even if we can't turn it there. First, it wouldn't be too complicated to build a wye somewhere in the vicinity, with a bit of willingness.

Secondly, a turntable could also be built. That technology was working 150 years ago. It could still work today. Thirdly, a train with two locomotives placed back-to-back could be used. It wouldn't be optimal, fuel consumption-wise, such a short train but who knows what the train will be like when services resume? Gaspésians have always been loyal to their passenger train.

We know that the Matapédia-New Richmond link would only be the first leg of a phase 2 service, as the line to New Carlisle could be repaired before the end of 2023. So why not give the potential clientele a possibility to travel as soon as possible, in an attempt to bolster the ridership before better days?

VIA Rail's bad faith is such that when the office of Member of Parliament Kristina Michaud met with officials of the transporter, the only option offered to Gaspésians was detouring the Halifax-Montreal train to New Richmond, which would, according to them, add six hours to the trip.

It was proof of VIA Rail's carelessness and negligence regarding the calling of the public corporation, however, the transporter's officials admitted, probably without realizing it, that technically, the service could resume to New Richmond. Using another train is the solution though.

The temporary use of Budd automotive cars is another solution that seems ruled out by VIA Rail, although it would be perfectly feasible. Collaboration with the Gaspésie Railway Society could also yield results, as the locomotives of that municipal entity could bring VIA Rail's train back to Matapédia, from New Richmond.

Nowadays, passenger trains are never profitable, overall. They might be on a daily basis between some huge cities but, where it works, they are mainly run by government-related bodies, and modern countries' governments understand that it can't be profitable. It is socially and economically beneficial for society though.

In Japan, the Shinkansen, or Bullet train, and in France, the TGV, are either unprofitable or marginally profitable. However, if the SNCF decides tomorrow to add to the TGV ticket price the cost of the infrastructure, nobody will take the train. There is an understanding in some countries that moving people must be affordable and efficient.

It hasn't been the case in Canada for at least 50 years. VIA Rail was created because Canadian National and Canadian Pacific wanted to get rid of money-losing passenger trains at a time everybody's dream was to buy a car.

At the time, the creation of VIA Rail was sort of botched instead of well-planned and a correction of the situation has never really happened. It leaves us with a public corporation with a significant administrative staff running a few trains. Those administrators take people living in rural regions for fools or

fourth-class citizens, or both.

How can they justify that the Maritime people are not getting at least a daily service? Who is deciding that people cannot travel by train four days out of seven?

If VIA Rail and the Canadian government don't express better collaboration with Gaspésians and the people from other regions like the Lower Saint Lawrence, Abitibi and Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean, pressures should be made to implement a Quebec-based public rail transporter and take over most of VIA Rail's trains in the province.

It would require a fair amount of investment but daily and reliable trains would be an advantage for the whole province. It would reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It would allow people from all walks of life to access parts of Quebec that are currently under-served, shortcomings that generate significant social and economic costs. Lastly, it would allow rural citizens to take advantage of transportation means that are available in most modern countries.

The initiative would require uneasy negotiations between the Canadian and Quebec governments but maybe VIA Rail's management would be relieved through getting rid of something considered a load. It would also mean hard negotiations with CN for right of ways, but not trying is not a solution.

The stakeholders could benefit from an "opting out" clause, which means that the VIA Rail budget going to regional services would be handed out to an entity that we could call for now Quebec Rail.

The current VIA Rail context is no longer acceptable, business-wise, society-wise and environmentally speaking.

In the early-1960, Gaspésians could count on two trains making daily round-trips between Matapédia and Gaspé. A daily train is reasonable, 60 years later, and it can start with a service on one part of our line.

We have endured so many blows from VIA Rail's management that we have come to accept abnormal situations. Our patience should be running thin by now.