

20 months later, Transports Québec finally publishes a call for tenders to repair a railway bridge

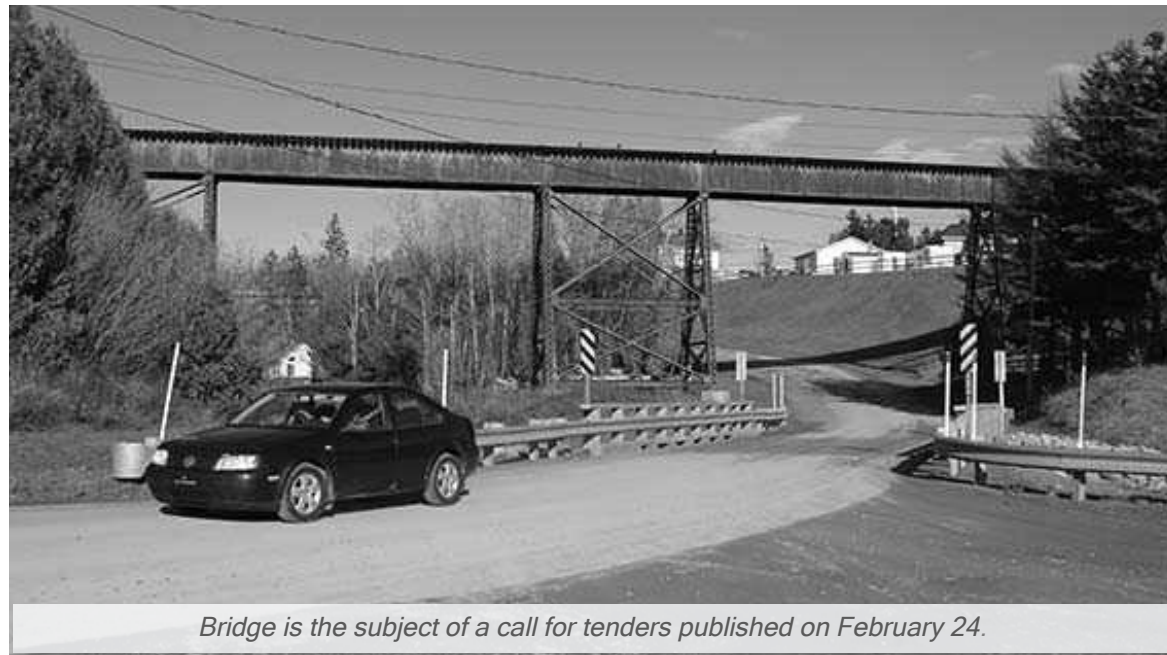
Gilles Gagné

CAPLAN – Twenty and a half months after the publication of the last call for tenders to replace a railway bridge in the Gaspé Peninsula, Transports Québec announces that another bridge, that of Ruisseau-Leblanc in Caplan, is the subject of a call for proposals until March 28.

The February 24 announcement came three weeks after a press release from the ministry postponing the reopening of the Caplan-Port-Daniel portion of the Gaspé rail network for two years, in 2024 instead of 2022. This press release also revealed that the reopening of the Port-Daniel-Gaspé section, scheduled for 2025, is no longer characterized by a timetable, although the intention to go to Gaspé is maintained.

The postponement had earned Transports Québec an array of criticism considering that, before February 24, the last call for tenders for the replacement or repair of a railway bridge dated back to June 12, 2020. The bridges have been identified since at least 2010 as a priority for the Gaspé Peninsula network.

Transports Québec specified on February 24 that other calls for tenders will follow before the end of winter to repair the bridges at Bonaventure, Shigawake and the bridge spanning over the Petite Rivière Port-Daniel, west of the village's station. Located at the municipal limit of Caplan and Saint-Siméon, the Ruisseau-



Bridge is the subject of a call for tenders published on February 24.

Photo: G. Gagné

Leblanc Bridge should cost between \$5 and \$10 million, according to the call for tenders' specifications.

Although he finds the repair delays imposed by Transports Québec "unforgivable" and denounced the "incompetence" of certain elements of this ministry, Bernard Babin, of the Coalition of Gaspésians for the future of the train, sees in this call for tenders "a breath of fresh air, a glimmer of hope, a distant light at the end of the tunnel," he says.

"The comments, the criticisms of the last few weeks have had an effect. It comforts us to see that the Government of Québec considers our criticisms, while the work is progressing at a snail's pace. I have better hopes of seeing the VIA Rail passenger train return to New Carlisle in 2023, in a first step before Gaspé. I would like Premier François Legault to intercede with Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, to put

pressure on VIA Rail in this regard," adds Mr. Babin.

Does he believe that Transports Québec only published the February 24 call for tenders to silence the discontent raised by the postponement of the reopening of the Caplan-Port-Daniel rail stretch? "I am confident that the ministry has taken note of the importance of the economic activity that the railway represents in the Gaspé Peninsula, and that the passenger train is also important for the Gaspé residents. I think they understood that we had to speed up the pace, that the machine must start again," he concludes.

Currently, the two main customers of the Gaspésie Railway Society, namely LM Wind Power of Gaspé and Votorantim Cimentos of Port-Daniel, must transport their production by truck to the rail transshipment centre in New Richmond, created in 2016 to compensate for the fact that the

railway was put in a dormant state on two-thirds of the network in 2015.

Transports Québec invokes the increased complexity of the

mandates to be carried out and the sectors affected by coastal erosion to justify the postponement announced on February 3. The people of the Coalition of Gaspésians for the future of the train do not understand, however, that structures erected with very rudimentary technical means 100 or 120 years ago pose such a challenge, considering the current means.

Transports Québec has owned the Matapédia to Gaspé line since March 2015, when the former owner, the Gaspésie Railway Society, a municipal entity, filed for the protection of the court, amidst financial problems. The Gaspésie Railway Society remained the freight train operator in the meantime until now.