

# Coalition for the return of the passenger train meets with VIA Rail president

GILLES GAGNÉ

CARLETON — Representatives of the Coalition of Gaspésians for the return of the VIA Rail passenger train, along with Éric Dubé, the president of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, met with the president and chief executive officer of VIA Rail, Mario Pélouquin, on November 1 regarding the public transporter’s intentions to resume its service on the Gaspé Peninsula.

Although VIA Rail’s president didn’t commit to a date for the resumption of traffic or a potential reopening of segments along the Matapédia to Gaspé line, a query repeatedly posed by the Coalition, its spokesperson, Cynthia Patterson, described the encounter as “surprising and promising.”

“I am inclined to give him some time to reflect on the file. I call that meeting surprising and promising because Mr. Pélouquin said that he will come to the Gaspé Peninsula in early 2024, either in January or February. It is his idea to come here in the middle of the winter. He said it before we had to ask him. That makes me want to continue discussions with him,” says Ms. Patterson, a Barachois citizen who has dedicated 38 years to advocating for the protection and improvement of rail services in the Gaspé Peninsula

There is room for hope, more so than over recent years, during which VIA Rail’s management stayed physically distant from regional issues such as the resumption of the service between Matapédia and Gaspé.

“Number one, we had the meeting. Secondly, we were not squeezed out of time and, thirdly, we had a real discussion,” stresses Cynthia Patterson.



Photo: Eve-Danièle Veilleux, VIA Rail Canada

Rémi Bujold, of Consilium Relations; Éric Dubé, president of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie; Cynthia Patterson, Coalition of Gaspésians, for the return of VIA Rail’s passenger train spokesperson; Mario Pélouquin, president of VIA Rail; Lucie Desrochers, Gilles Lamy and Bernard Babin, all administrators of the Coalition; as well as Michael Acosta, executive officer of VIA Rail’s commercial affairs.

son.

She notes that despite the positive atmosphere stemming from the meeting, the challenges are far from over. As a result, she’s exercising discretion in revealing specific details of certain aspects of the discussions at this time. However, she is open about the themes covered in the exchange.

“We told him that “This is your train but also our train.” We talked about everything, the time frame (for the service resumption), the possible return to New Carlisle before Gaspé, what Gaspésians should have as a service, the availability of rolling material and human resources (as VIA Rail will have to train new employees in the region). I talked about the elderly, the most vulnerable part of the population for whom the bus is not an option,” she mentions.

“For now, we do not want to negotiate publicly. It is clear

that there is an intention from him and us to continue this conversation,” adds Ms. Patterson. She thinks that if Mr. Pélouquin visits the Gaspé Peninsula, he will gain a better grasp of the unenviable public transport situation and understand the urgency of resuming VIA Rail’s service as soon as possible. This viewpoint has been consistently emphasized by the members of the Coalition of Gaspésians for the return of the VIA Rail passenger train, a stance that predates the organization’s formation.

The last VIA Rail train to operate east of Matapédia dates back to the beginning of August 2013. The service was temporarily suspended because a saline solution had then been used as a defoliant, which caused damage to grade crossing signals. A bus replaced the train until the end of September 2013 at which time VIA Rail’s service was indefinitely sus-

pended due to the condition of some bridges. At the time, the passenger train had been stopping in New Carlisle since December 2011 as urgent repairs were ordered on a bridge located in Chandler.

When VIA Rail’s service was offered between Matapédia and Gaspé with three weekly return trips to Montreal, ridership peaked at nearly 30,000 passengers yearly. This made the Gaspé Peninsula train more popular than the combined ridership of the two other Quebec regional trains, linking Montreal to Abitibi and Montreal to Saguenay-Lac-Saint-

Jean.

The Gaspé Peninsula train also boasted the highest cost recovery ratio among VIA Rail’s regional trains.

Transports Québec, the ministry that owns the line between Matapédia and Gaspé, has committed to reopening the railroad between New Richmond and Port Daniel before the end of 2024. Additionally, they plan to reinstate the section between Port Daniel and Gaspé before the end of 2026.

In the weeks ahead, the president of VIA Rail will have ample opportunities to think of Gaspésians as the Coalition has presented him with 350 postcards signed by Gaspésians requesting a prompt return of the passenger train. The postcard campaign was launched at the beginning of the 2023 summer. Hundreds of additional postcards were also sent to the Member of Parliament for the Gaspé Peninsula and Magdalen Islands, Diane Lebouthillier; to the Minister of Transport Canada, Omar Alghabra (until the end of July); and to the new Minister of Transport Canada, Pablo Rodriguez since then.

“He acknowledged the ones he previously received by Canada Post and he is still receiving some. He will be receiving more,” predicts Cynthia Patterson, as volunteers will have people sign additional postcards at public events over the coming weeks.



Photo: Gilles Gagné

The only place in the region where Gaspésians have access to VIA Rail trains is Matapédia.