

Coalition of Gaspesians for the return of VIA Rail gathers momentum

GILLES GAGNÉ

CARLETON – Two volunteers of the Coalition of Gaspesians for the return of VIA Rail's passenger train, Micheline St-Onge and Cynthia Patterson, garnered the support of nearly 700 people. The people signed postcards urging VIA Rail's president and federal ministers to bring back the passenger train as soon as possible between Matapédia, New Carlisle, and Gaspé.

Ms. St-Onge and Ms. Patterson set up a small booth at Carleton's Christmas Market on November 18-19, where 436 individuals signed postcards addressed to VIA Rail's president, Mario Pélouin. Additionally, 259 people took postcards to distribute among family and friends.

"In the latter case, people who will sign postcards will send them to three federal ministers, Diane Lebouthillier (who is also the Member of Parliament for the riding of Gaspésie-Magdalen Islands), Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault and Transport Minister Pablo Rodriguez," explains Micheline St-Onge.

At the end of October, Ms.

St-Onge, who lives in Saint-Omer, conducted similar efforts at the New Richmond mall, Ambroise's pastries shop in Maria, and Carleton's Metro supermarket. During those sessions, 381 additional people signed a petition and postcards.

"We only had 150 postcards there, so that's why we asked people to sign petitions," says Micheline St-Onge.

She and Cynthia Patterson encountered some skepticism about the return of the passenger train during Carleton's Christmas Market, but people still signed postcards.

"I realized that some people don't believe in it anymore. They think it's been a long time since the service was suspended. For other people, the more things go, with the media reports, people say to themselves that it is possible. At one point during the market, five people were signing at the same time. People from neighbouring kiosks came to see us wondering what we were doing," says Ms. St-Onge.

"We had a lot of testimonies from people who stopped at our booth. For so many people, taking the train



Photo: Courtesy of Cynthia Patterson

Micheline St-Onge (behind the kiosk) and Cynthia Patterson had close to 700 people in two days either sign postcards or make sure that friends and family members will sign them.

for a return trip to Gaspé was a family tradition. They did it with their parents, with their children and they can no longer do it with their grandchildren. A lady stopped to tell us that she used to go to Toronto four times a year. She

doesn't drive, so she doesn't go anymore. The bus trip is not an option for a lot of people. Another lady told us that her sister lives in Gatineau. She has to find a lift when she goes. Another person told us that she cried when services were sus-

pended. The most striking element of the testimonies came from an elderly woman who was not able to go to see her sister before dying. The passenger train is not a need, it's an emergency," concludes Ms. St-Onge.