

Coalition for the Return of the Passenger Train pushes to have service restored before the end of 2023

Gilles Gagné

NEW CARLISLE - The members of the Coalition of Gaspésians for the return of the VIA Rail passenger train are pushing for the resumption of service between Matapédia and New Carlisle before the end of 2023.

They are convinced that the line repairs currently taking place between Caplan and New Carlisle can be completed before the Christmas holidays. Although this phase approach would be beneficial in returning some service to the Gaspé Peninsula, Cynthia Patterson, who is an administrator for the coalition, is quick to point out that the ultimate goal is to have the service fully restored to Gaspé.

She stresses that between December 2011 and September 2013, VIA Rail served Gaspésians by only covering the stretch between Matapédia and New Carlisle due to bridge repairs in the Chandler area. In September 2013, the whole service was suspended because of the state of the line.

“The process can be applied the other way around, considering that ridership will improve with the eventual addition of the rest of the line. The regional population is rising again; we saw it this year once more. Up to 25% of our greenhouse effect emissions are transportation related. Our policy decisions are not consistent. Here in the region, considering what we have lost partially or wholly: bus, train and plane services over the years, we have little choice but to buy cars,” points out Rev. Patterson.

VIA Rail served the Gaspé Peninsula daily until January 15, 1990, when the service was reduced to three weekly round trips between Montreal, Matapédia and Gaspé.

“Way back in the 1990s, we were making it an environmental issue. Politically, economically, socially and environmentally, there are multiple reasons to bring it back. There must be political will,” she adds.

So far, that political willingness has mainly come from the Quebec government, which announced \$100 million in May 2017 to repair the line it acquired in March 2015. Another sum of \$135 million was added in February 2020.

Cynthia Patterson men-

tions that Transports Québec has been slow in initiating line repairs. Still, she stresses that since February 2022, the pace of line renewal has accelerated significantly.

The federal side of the issue has not moved accordingly, considering that VIA Rail’s administration has over recent years mentioned that the passenger train would only come back once the line is open to Gaspé.

“VIA Rail is very busy with other projects, with the new material that is brought in the (Quebec City-Windsor) corridor. There is an office to do all that. It is a matter of organizing their budget and allocating the money to the right places,” says Rev. Patterson.

The Coalition of Gaspésians for the Return of the Passenger Train is therefore compelled to remind the public transporter’s management that other parts of the country need a service.

“We can be left in the cold if we don’t move. It has to be put in the other context as well. We were abandoned during the pandemic, transport-wise. The bus service was phased down, like the train and air services. We used to have a daily (round trip) train service and two bus round trips. The context we are living in now is a lot worse,” she points out.

VIA Rail still receives money for the Gaspé Peninsula

VIA Rail’s budget for operating the Montreal to Gaspé train used to hover between \$6 million and \$7 million annually, with revenues ranging between \$2 million and \$3 million. With a cost recovery ratio of between 30 and 35% most of the years, sometimes more, the Gaspésian train was often at the top of VIA Rail’s regional services in that regard. Some other trains don’t reach 15%.

Cynthia Patterson remarks that since the suspension of the VIA Rail service in September 2013 in the Gaspé Peninsula, the public transporter has still received the annual budget earmarked for the region’s train.

“They have to put it (the money) in a trust account. We pay our taxes. Have our taxes diminished? No. They have the mandate to serve the regions and they have aban-



Photo: G. Gagné

In August 2018, prior to the Quebec electoral campaign, Cynthia Patterson questioned Pierre Moreau, who at the time was the Minister responsible for the region, about the acceleration of refurbishment work along the region’s line.

doned it in our case. They can’t keep the money and abandon the mandate. They can’t use the upgrade of equipment elsewhere to leave us neglected and abandoned,” she declares.

Can the money saved for the peninsula’s regional service, between \$40 million and \$50 million over a decade, be used to cover some clientele losses before returning to Gaspé? “That’s how I view it,” she says.

Pressure to be put on the federal government

Cynthia Patterson has conducted many battles to protect VIA Rail services in the Gaspé Peninsula and elsewhere since she was, for years, the national coordinator of Rural Dignity. She knows that the coming months will require political pressure in order to regain the Matapédia-New Carlisle service in time for the Christmas break.

“We want to focus on the federal government, to convince those groups to do that (to have VIA Rail in a return mode in the region),” says Rev. Patterson. She is adamant that VIA Rail should be advancing their part of the work and that Gaspésians must insist that rail service will return. “We have the potential for new customers, (because) people are more aware of the environmental stakes. We have new regional tools that were not around 20 or 30 years ago,” adds Cynthia Patterson. One of those new regional tools is the RÉGIM commuter service. That service could serve as a

link between New Carlisle and Gaspé until the line is reopened over its entire length.

Cynthia Patterson hopes that Gaspé Peninsula and Magdalen Islands Member of Parliament and Minister of National Revenue, Diane Lebouthillier will be more proactive in the railway file, even though she repeatedly expressed doubts about the possibility of the line being repaired between Port Daniel and Gaspé. This is despite the opinion of experts who say it is perfectly feasible.

So far, the federal government has contributed \$45.8 million to refurbishing the line, a sum mainly earmarked to adapt the work to deal with erosion and available for the use by Transports Québec. It

is not clear whether the grant has been used as of yet.

The Coalition of Gaspésians for the Return of the Passenger Train has produced a 15-page brief that sets out a history of the absence of passenger trains and the reasons that necessitate a rapid resumption of service.

Between 2000 and December 2011, VIA Rail on average transported between 26,000 and 30,000 people annually on its Montreal-Gaspé train, despite many service inconveniences such as delays during busy summer days and the fact that the train was often short-turned at New Carlisle due to those delays.

The ridership of the Gaspé Peninsula train back then was higher than the total of VIA Rail’s two other regional trains in Quebec, which serve Abitibi and Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean.

Having retired in 2022, from her church duties, Cynthia Patterson now has more time for the railway file. She has been vocal about the issue of train services for 37 years, first getting involved when VIA Rail decided to eliminate 13 railway station stops between Mont-Joli and Gaspé.

“There were public hearings back then. They closed 12 (stations). We saved the Barachois station. VIA Rail was saying that it wanted to keep open the stations located along Highway 132. That’s exactly the case of the Barachois station,” she underlines.