

## François Legault announces increased efforts for Port Daniel to Gaspé rail advancement

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NEW CARLISLE – On November 17, Quebec Premier, François Legault, gave the green light for the launch of the most important calls for tenders for the repair of the Gaspé railway, focusing specifically on the Port Daniel to Gaspé portion of the railway.

This third segment of the Matapedia-Gaspé railway, will require an investment of \$518 million and is slated for completion in the fall of 2026. To accelerate the work which began in May 2017, the Quebec government will consolidate contracts associated with the Port-Daniel to Gaspé section into four major calls for tenders.

Premier Legault linked the need to restore rail traffic between Port Daniel and Gaspé, where no train has passed since 2014 due to deteriorating infrastructure, to the wind development plan by Hydro-Quebec. The remaining repairs predominantly involve upgrading bridges, replacing culverts, building retaining walls and, at times, moving the track away from cliffs or the shoreline.

“It’s important for what’s coming, for the wind energy boom,” summarized François Legault, alluding to Hydro-Quebec’s ambitious plan to procure 10,000 megawatts of electricity from wind sources by 2035. This initiative represents an output nearly three times greater than the current power generated by the already established wind farms in Quebec.

François Legault revealed that Michael Sabia, the president of Hydro-Québec, is even tempted to launch calls for tenders representing four times the wind power currently installed in Quebec. The premier emphasized the need to revolutionize transportation habits in Quebec, stating “where we are the kings of trucking.”

In a pointed reference, though not explicitly naming the LM Wind Power blade manufacturing plant in Gaspé, Mr. Legault highlighted that the expansion of the wind power sector would also generate manufacturing jobs within the province.

“To send out the blades, we need the railway. (...) It will also be important to bring back the passenger train,” insisted Premier Legault. The latter



Photo: G. Gagné

*MNA for Bonaventure, Catherine Blouin; Quebec Premier François Legault; President of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, Éric Dubé; and the MNA for Gaspé, Stéphane Sainte-Croix took advantage of their visit to New Carlisle to take a glimpse at the work being carried out on the railway line there.*

part of his remark was pertaining to the federally owned carrier VIA Rail, over which he has no control, he reminded the attendees.

### Delays and commitments

The Matapedia to Gaspé railway repair project has encountered numerous delays since 2017, first under the Liberal Party government of Philippe Couillard, then since the arrival of the Coalition Avenir Québec in October 2018. A particularly challenging period between June 2020 to February 2022, lasting 20 months, was characterized by the absence of publication of calls for tenders relating to this railway.

Despite \$310 million being disbursed or committed in the railway, not a single kilometre of additional railway line has been put back into operation. Since Transports Québec put the Caplan-Gaspé sector on hold in 2015, work mainly focused on the Matapedia-Caplan portion at first but, since the beginning of 2022, the Caplan to Port Daniel stretch has been targeted for further upgrading.

In fact, the network, made available to the freight transporter, the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, has lost a few kilometres of functionality since the end of the spring.

François Legault, who obviously ignored that detail, indicated on November 17 that the entire Matapedia-Caplan section remained functional and that its repairs were completed.

In reality, the few trains oc-

asionally serving Caplan have been unable to travel beyond the Henderson Road area of New Richmond since the beginning of the summer. This limitation is due to the replacement of a culvert and the impending relocation of the rails east of the Black Cape area of New Richmond, near the municipal limit of Caplan.

In 2020, Transports Québec committed to reopening the Caplan-Port Daniel section by the end of 2022, a commitment that, at the end of February 2022, was postponed until the end of 2024. Simultaneously, the repair timeline for the Gaspé network, which, in August 2019, François Legault committed to finishing in 2025, has now been pushed back to 2026.

Responding to inquiries about potential delays affecting the completion of work up to Gaspé, François Legault replied that “it is a commitment that we made, but that (Transport Québec Minister) Geneviève Guilbault also made. As you know, there is an election in the fall of 2026, and we want it to be done before the election.”

The overall refurbishment of the Matapedia-Gaspé section should cost \$872 million upon completion in 2026, according to Transport Minister Guilbault’s statement during her visit to Gaspé on June 27.

The mention of this amount on Friday prompted Mr. Legault to say that “it is more than (the sum devoted to the coming of the) Los Angeles

The Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie is currently transporting cement, woodchips, lumber and steel along the New Richmond to Matapedia line. However, cement traffic faces stagnation as the product has to be trucked between the Port Daniel cement plant and the New Richmond terminal. The high transshipment cost for customers located relatively close to the Gaspé Peninsula makes it impractical to transfer loads from a truck to a railway car.

Initially, a 2022 reopening of the line between New Richmond and Port Daniel, as expected, would have allowed the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie to make up for the May 2022 loss of windmill blade traffic. Input for the cement plant could also bolster rail traffic between Matapedia and Port Daniel. However, both aspects are currently on hold until the line is functional as far as the Saint Mary’s Cement Plant. The railway passes through that plant’s property.

The entire Matapedia-Gaspé line spans 325 kilometres (202.4 miles).