

## “Good luck” for the repairs of the railroad to Gaspé, says Lebouthillier

### Federal Minister raises controversy with her skepticism

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GRANDE-RIVIÈRE – Member of Parliament for the Gaspésie-Magdalen Islands, Minister Diane Lebouthillier, seems unconvinced of the feasibility of rehabilitating the railway to Gaspé, a project re-launched in 2017.

“If you want to bring the rail back to Gaspé, I say good luck to you,” she said on January 10 during a press conference on her last year’s report. The Member of Parliament and Minister of the Canada Revenue Agency explains that she had a front-row seat during the storm from December 23 to 24, 2022.

Gusts of 94 to 115 kilometres per hour were officially recorded at the Gaspé and Cap d’Espoir weather stations, causing extensive damage in some spots, however, it was relatively limited in the case of the railroad.

Diane Lebouthillier was on site in Chandler during the early hours of Christmas morning to see the extent of the damage. “At 7:30 a.m., I was on the Banc de Pabos taking pictures and to see the condition of the rail and I can say that if you want to bring the rail back to Gaspé, I say good luck to you because we have 24 kilometres in the erosion zone,” she says.

On August 26, 2019, just 16 days before the official start of the electoral campaign, the federal government, represented by Diane Lebouthillier, committed \$45.8 million to rehabilitate the rail network which extends over 325 kilometres along the south side of the Gaspé Peninsula, between Matapédia and Gaspé.

This amount is administered by Transports Québec, which has owned the railroad since 2015. That ministry must use the money to mainly rehabilitate the last section between Port-Daniel-Gascons and Gaspé, in an attempt to cope with coastal erosion.

No doubt among municipal politicians

The doubt expressed on January 10 by Diane Lebouthillier does not seem to affect the faith of the mayor of Gaspé to see the project come



Photo: Anthony Bernard Prince

Despite damage to the track, a few hours would be enough to repair this damage, according to Luc Lévesque, director of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie. Long-term repairs there, like the improvement of the rock dyke, are also perfectly feasible, he says.

to fruition in its entirety. “The important thing is not that people believe it or not, it’s that we’re going to do it and I can confirm that we’re going to do it,” says Daniel Côté, mayor of Gaspé.

He also sits on the board of directors of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie – the entity that operates the trains on the active part of the railway. He is a member of the infrastructure monitoring committee with the Government of Quebec. Mr. Côté says he is in close and frequent contact with engineers specialized in several railroad-related fields, and that beyond the striking images that were captured following the storm, the problem will be relatively easy to solve.

“What we are told is that the Banc de Pabos sector can be settled in a snap. It’s very easy to fix without being very expensive. Visually speaking, it looks big for the average man looking at it from the outside, but the railroad engineers tell us that these are peccadilloes compared to the whole work, so I will trust the experts. I have no concerns. We should not base our opinion on the visual appearance of this sector. It would be a monumental mistake and I won’t do that,” adds Mr. Côté.

The mayor of Gaspé would also like to point out that the repair of the line is the responsibility of the Government of Quebec, where the will is clear. “Both the Minister of Transport and her ministry intend to restore it. I will rely on them for the repair work and we will continue to push in this direction,” he summarizes.

He also claims to have a verbal commitment from VIA Rail’s senior management for a return of passenger trains to the Gaspé Peninsula, but the public corporation would return to the region only when it was certain of being able to do so safely to Gaspé.

For her part, Diane Lebouthillier wants the trains to at least go to New Carlisle and maybe Port-Daniel-Gascons. “We are working hard to bring the rail back to the [McInnis] cement plant. When we have the goods, the work will continue with VIA Rail. My objective is indeed to bring the passenger train back at least to New Carlisle,” says the MP.

The president of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie (SCFG), Éric Dubé, intends to take Diane Lebouthillier’s wish for “good luck” in “a good way” although he does not rule out

that the words of the minister may have been tinged with skepticism.

She also raised controversy in May 2022 by telling CHNC radio that she will believe in a return of rail services to Gaspé when she sees it. The president of the SCFG calmly notes “that we are working so that she sees it”.

Diane Lebouthillier launched this “good luck” after criticizing the quality of air services in Quebec, saying that it had not improved since her election in 2015 and that it is “worse than it has ever been”. The Gaspé SPEC then asked her if it was not time to emphasize the plurality of the inter-regional transport offer considering that coach services have also been cut over the last decade by more than 60%.

It was then that she retorted that SCFG is working hard to bring the rail back to Port-Daniel for goods and VIA Rail to New Carlisle for passengers. New Carlisle is halfway between Matapédia and Gaspé. The press briefing ended quite abruptly when she was asked to elaborate on what she meant by “good luck.”

The director general of the SCFG, Luc Lévesque, also specified that work to rein-

force the Banc de Pabos will be carried out in 2023 or 2024. Like the mayor of Gaspé, he assures that a few hours at most will be enough to fill the hole dug by the December 23-24 storm.

“The railway had been summarily repaired last summer to transfer equipment from one side of the Banc de Pabos to the other. The Ministry of Transport made a temporary repair because it was cheaper to transfer this equipment by rail than by road. It was not money put on the fire. We are in discussion with the ministry to make riprap,” he says.

“A lot of teams have gone through this: specialists in rockfill, environment and climate change. The project is on track. We do not need the comments of the ‘peanut gallery’ who do not know the rail infrastructure. When major work is done on the Banc de Pabos, it will be to ensure the sustainability of the railway. There has always been repair work in this sector, such as on Highway 132 on the north side of the Gaspé Peninsula. And let’s be clear: the railway on the Banc de Pabos protects Highway 132. If we let the railway go, we let the road go,” says Mr. Lévesque.

He also ensures that the “24 kilometres in the erosion zone” to which Ms. Lebouthillier refers include sectors relatively close to the sea, without any threat weighing on them in the short or medium term. “There is a threat at all in some cases. It is just on the seaside,” says Mr. Lévesque.

During her controversial remarks in May 2022, she added to her skepticism about the rail situation east of Port-Daniel: “I am not sure I would board a train,” referring to the Banc de Pabos area.

In the middle of her first federal election campaign of 2015, Diane Lebouthillier raised controversy when she stated that, in her priorities, the bus was coming before aerial services, and aerial services were coming before the train. At the same time, regional leaders were fighting to convince the Quebec government of the relevance

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#### TRAIN

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of repairing the whole line between Matapédia and Gaspé.

The pace of repairs is slowly increasing

So far, in nearly six years, Transports Québec has either invested or committed just over \$100 million of its own funds to repair the Gaspé railway, out of a total of \$235 million announced. This sum does not include the federal amount of \$45.8 million.

The pace of work was slow in 2017 and 2018, with less, and sometimes much less than \$10 million invested in the line upgrading.

In 2020 and 2021, the yearly amount invested or earmarked surpassed the \$20 million mark, and it surpassed \$40 million in 2022.

Transports Québec has committed to reopening the Caplan-Port Daniel portion of its network in 2024, two years after the previous deadline of 2022. This is not the first delay for this ministry. In 2017, the railway was supposed to be reopened to Port Daniel by 2020.

In December 2022, Transports Québec committed to supplying a more accurate account of its investments in the Gaspé Peninsula railroad dur-



Photo: G. Gagné

Diane Lebouthillier election: The remarks of Member of Parliament for Gaspésie-Magdalen Islands, Diane Lebouthillier, do not worry the municipal sector of the Gaspé Peninsula.

ing the first weeks of 2023.

VIA Rail trains have not run between Matapédia and New Carlisle since August 2013, and between New Carlisle and Gaspé since December 2011.

Since 2015, due to the state of certain bridges, the freight service has been limited to the Matapédia to Caplan stretch of the line, with the Caplan to Gaspé portion being closed until thorough repairs are completed.

The slowness in the line upgrading has caused major

revenue shortcomings for the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie between 2017 and the first part of 2022, since its two main customers, Port Daniel’s McInnis Cement and Gaspé’s LM Windpower, are located along the dormant section of the line. Trucking cement and windmill blades to New Richmond, for their transfer to railcars, has so far deprived the SCFG of important sales and it has affected the profitability of the two plants and that of the transporter.