

## RAILWAY:

# Ottawa announces Gaspé Peninsula rail repair project

## Minister Alhabra remains vague about the return of VIA Rail

● GILLES GAGNÉ

PORT DANIEL – On July 4, almost four years after earmarking an envelope of \$45.8 million aimed at contributing in the repair of the Gaspé Peninsula railway, Canada's Minister of Transport, Omar Alhabra, announced a \$10 million project. The project aims to protect the railroad from sea erosion caused by climate change.

The \$10 million announced will oddly not come from the original envelope as was announced on August 26, 2019, at the dawn of an electoral campaign. This time around, the money will come from the new Climate Change and Adaptation to Extreme Weather Infrastructure component of the Rail Safety Improvement Program.

The federal government will contribute two-thirds of a \$15 million project to create a long retaining wall located just west of the Port Daniel rail tunnel. The project is being managed by Transports Québec.

"This large retaining wall will protect the railway infrastructure from coastal erosion for the next 70 years. It will be designed to resist stronger waves. This is the largest of the 39 projects being carried out in Canada that are part of the same program," says Minister Alhabra.

The call for tenders which will be published in September will cover repairs to the railway, the installation of a water drainage system under the tracks and the construction of a ditch between the adjacent Capitaine Fournier Road



Photo: G. Gagné

*Canada's Minister of Transport, Omar Alhabra, remains vague about the possible return of VIA Rail to the Gaspé Peninsula.*

and the railway. The work should be completed within a year.

The Rail Safety Improvement Program envelope from which the amount for the Port-Daniel project comes, is endowed with a \$29 million-budget for the entire country.

The sum of \$45.8 million announced in 2019 comes from the Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund. Although the money is provided by the federal government, it is transferred to the Quebec Department of Transport, Transports Québec, when projects meet the standards of this federal fund.

During her visit to Gaspé on June 27, the Quebec Minister of Transport, Geneviève Guilbault, indicated that at that time \$38 million remained of the \$45.8 million in the federal envelope for 2019. Coalition avenir Québec's Member of the National Assembly for Bonaventure riding,

Catherine Blouin, points out that another chunk of \$5 million will soon be allocated to another initiative qualifying for the Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund.

Minister Alhabra mentioned at the beginning of his announcement that he was proud "to come to our mayor Hazel McCallion's hometown." Mr. Alhabra has represented the riding of Mississauga Centre in the House of Commons since the 2015 election. He was previously the member of Parliament (MP) for Mississauga-Erindale between 2006 and 2008.

Born in Port Daniel in 1921, Hazel McCallion, née Journeaux, was elected mayor of Mississauga in November 1978 and served 36 years until her retirement in 2014, making her the longest-serving mayor in the city's history. She died on January 29, 2023, two weeks short of her 102nd birthday.

### Return of VIA Rail: Minister Alhabra remains vague

Asked about the possible return of VIA Rail between Matapedia and Gaspé, where service has been suspended for 10 years, Minister Alhabra remains vague, saying from the outset that "I would like to see VIA Rail in every corner of Canada."

He mentions that the public carrier has received \$2 billion over the past few years, in particular, to rejuvenate its fleet of locomotives and passenger cars, that a new president has just been appointed to head VIA Rail and that he is

aware of the desire of Gaspésians to have their passenger train back. "We are exploring the avenues," summarizes Minister Alhabra.

Faced with another set of questions on this subject, during which the press reminded him that the law obliges VIA Rail to serve the Matapedia-Gaspé line, Omar Alhabra notes that the carrier "is independent and makes its own decisions; we must make sure they (the VIA people) have the resources to come back. I look forward to discussions on this subject but I cannot give you specific answers."

The minister would not commit to bringing the passenger train back in phases; first with its return between Matapedia and New Carlisle, then to Gaspé when the rail line there is functional, by December 2026 – a commitment made by Transports Québec on June 27.

This return also depends on the order of work chosen by Transports Québec. This order is far from being realized from west to east. Until now, the Matapedia-Caplan section has always been functional, but since the announcement of a complete overhaul of the Gaspé rail network in May 2017, not a single kilometer of additional rail has been put back into operation, despite calls for tenders now exceeding \$200 million.

### Lukewarm reactions

This lack of an orderly traffic resumption time frame irritates Cynthia Patterson, of the Coalition of Gaspésians for the Return of the Passenger Train. She and her allies have managed to collect just over 16,000 signatures since the end of winter in an attempt to convince government authorities to bring back the VIA Rail train in stages.

"We appreciate the Minister's

visit, but the thing that is missing is consistency between the three levels of government. Waiting for the railway to be repaired in Gaspé before VIA Rail returns does not make sense. It's ridiculous. It (the railway) will be restored to New Carlisle before the end of the year. We insist on the gradual return of the passenger train," says Ms. Patterson.

"We must not lose sight of the notion of service to the population. That's why it's so important that the passenger train be back in New Carlisle as soon as the track there is repaired. I have the impression that this notion of service for citizens is sometimes forgotten in the evolution of this file. (...) That is why we have to push, push, push to convince the three levels of government to work together," insists Ms. Patterson, who has nearly 40 years of activism for the maintenance and improvement of rail services in the Gaspé Peninsula.

For four years, the management of VIA Rail has insisted that the return of its passenger train to the Gaspé Peninsula will only materialize once the railway line is repaired to Gaspé. The federal transporter adds two other conditions, that the railroad is safe and that the traffic speed is good.

In 2015, Transports Québec acquired the Matapedia-Gaspé network from the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, a municipal entity that continues to operate freight trains on its functional portion, namely between Matapedia and Caplan, which represents approximately 40% of the entire network.

On June 27, Minister Geneviève Guilbault indicated that the complete repair of the Matapedia-Gaspé section will cost \$872 million. The amount excludes federal funding.



Photo: G. Gagné

*The sector targeted by the project announced by Minister Omar Alhabra is too close to the Baie des Chaleurs and requires protection.*