

RAILWAY FILE: Stakeholders react

GILLES GAGNÉ

GASPÉ – The stakeholders who have constantly put pressure on the governments to assure the resumption of railway services over the whole Matapédia-Gaspé line are happy about the June 27 announcement made by Quebec’s Transport Minister, Geneviève Guilbault, but some of them intend to keep an eye on the progress of the refurbishment.

Minister Guilbault failed to indicate in detail why Gaspésians should believe that the December 2026 traffic resumption target will hold after experiencing repeated delays. She simply noted that the repair studies will now allow for more precision.

Regional development consultant and former Member of the National Assembly for the riding of Gaspé, Gaétan Lelièvre, who in 2022 prepared for free a major document underlining the relevance of upgrading the line over its entire length, is reminding the public to stay vigilant in the rail file.

“It is a great announcement and it goes beyond my expectations of 2022. In my report, we mentioned that 2027 looked feasible, and we were afraid that the government would carry out the work until 2030. At one point, the government was no longer providing any deadline. The current project is ambitious, considering that there have been delays lately and we will have to keep a close eye on the calls for tenders,” says Mr. Lelièvre.

“A sum of \$7 billion to \$8 billion was invested in Montreal for the REM (Réseau express métropolitain, a light commuter train). We don’t see why \$600 million couldn’t be invested in a rural area, as the



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Daniel Côté mentions that business opportunities were lost since losing access to rail services.

places where the work that has to be done, bridges and culverts, is in general easily accessible physically. There are fewer obstacles than in a major urban centre,” also stresses Mr. Lelièvre.

A sum of \$600 million is effectively the value of the work that must still be handed out through calls for tenders to respect Transports Quebec December 2026 deadline.

“In Montreal, they carried out in excess of 10 times more work in three years. The governmental machine will have to work properly. We know that some of this machine’s elements were not favourable to the rehabilitation of our railway. It will take a firm hand to prevent the project from experiencing delays again. I know that governmental machine from my days in politics,” says Gaétan Lelièvre.

He praises the work of citizens like Mauril Minville for their involvement over the last year in the railway file.

“Last year, Mr. Minville was saying that the railway file was a political orphan at the government level but he told me a few hours ago that we might have found a godmother in Minister Guilbault,” concludes Mr Lelièvre.

About the cost of the line upgrade, the mayor of Gaspé, Daniel Côté, admits, “It is enormous but we know that the investment will last for close to 100 years. If we divide \$870 million by 100, it makes a bit more than \$8 million. We missed business opportunities because we didn’t have rail service. We missed on windmill blade transport and some industrial projects didn’t come to Gaspé because we didn’t have direct access to a rail service.”

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The importance of the train recognized

The Coalition of Gaspésians for the return of the passenger train receives the news brought by Minister Guilbault positively. The coalition keeps the target of bringing the passenger train back as soon as the line is fit between Caplan and New Carlisle.

“This progress revives the hope of the population to witness the return of the passenger train in the region in the near future. Indeed, the big question mark intended for tourists posted outside the Gaspé intermodal station represents, for a large number of Gaspésians, their questioning about the resumption of passenger rail transport, which was completely discontinued ten years ago. Also, the Coalition asks when the federal government and VIA Rail will indicate their willingness to board the train themselves. We are convinced that they could join the movement and announce very soon the service resumption between Matapédia and New Carlisle,” states the coalition members in a press release.

“Given the progress of work on section 2 (Caplan–Port Daniel- Gascons), we estimate that VIA Rail will be able to circulate safely to New Carlisle by the end of 2023, without waiting for complete rehabilitation for the railway line to Gaspé. This choice would make it possible to cover without delay the first

half of the railroad served by the SCFG (Société de chemin de fer de la Gaspésie) pending the full restoration of the service to Gaspé. A regional road carrier could also offer a shuttle service to the localities between New Carlisle and Gaspé, giving thus meaning to the word intermodality,” adds the coalition.

Carol Saucier, representative of the citizen movement Solidarité Gaspésie, says that, “We welcome this announcement. This return of the train will also contribute to the implementation of a desirable innovative socio-ecological transition. We will also continue to demonstrate vigilance to ensure that the various stages of future rail repairs are carried out as planned,”

Marie-Claude Brière, director of the Côte-de-Gaspé Chamber of Commerce, stresses that “this mode of transport could once again become a strategic vector for socio-economic development for the Gaspé territory and allow the development and retention of businesses. The business community also wants to quickly revive the Amiral tourist train in order to pursue the development associated with international cruises,”

As for Mauril Minville, spokesperson for the Citizens’ Committee of Gaspé and Percé, he points out that “we are very pleased to see this important commitment which will allow, after so many years of waiting, the population to reuse this essential and affordable transportation mode, especially for seniors.”

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Gaétan Lelièvre says that vigilance will remain important.