

SCFG considers reviving the tourist train service

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NEW RICHMOND – The management of Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie is exploring the possibility of reintroducing a tourist train along the Matapedia to Gaspé line. Two strategic moves have been initiated to assess the feasibility of this venture: the revival of the Amiral train to New Richmond and the exploration of an option to acquire 12 self-propelled passenger cars that are up for sale in Vermont.

The Amiral train has been idle in Gaspé since the fall of 2014, where it previously operated on the Gaspé to Percé route, catering to cruise ship passengers. However, in the subsequent years, then Quebec's Transport Minister Robert Poëti, placed the line east of Caplan in a dormant state due to infrastructure concerns, leaving the Amiral stranded in Gaspé.

In 2016, its locomotive was transported back to New Richmond in three main components and integrated into the freight train service. However, the four passenger cars and the two generator cars remained in Gaspé.

"We are now bringing back the cars to New Richmond. We hope to do it before Christmas, using transport trucks again. They have been vandalized there. At one point, they will be sent to Rail GD to check if they could still be used. We don't know yet when they will be evaluated by that shop," ex-



Photos: G. Gagné

plains Éric Dubé, president of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie (SCFG).

Simultaneously, the SCFG will launch a call for tenders to secure the services of a consultant. This consultant will be tasked with conducting a comprehensive market study and developing a business plan to gauge the potential of reestablishing a tourist train operation along the Gaspé Coast.

"We are giving ourselves a year before getting the results of the business plan and the market study," adds Mr. Dubé.

Automotive cars

Another option to be considered within the mandate assigned to a consulting firm is the evaluation of using Budd automotive cars as a tourist train, particularly if the Amiral

rolling stock is deemed unsuitable.

"We took an option on a series of Budd cars for the next year. They are located in Vermont. We made a deposit to keep the acquisition open for a year. All the cars were refurbished in Montreal at the beginning of the 2000s and kept inside a warehouse since that time. Luc (Lévesque, the SCFG director general) has never seen equipment in such good condition. Their refurbishment was thorough. The wiring, the mechanics, everything is in fine shape," assures Mr. Dubé.

The purchase option involves 12 Budd cars, a notable increase from the four-passenger car of the Amiral train. Does the SCFG plan to run many trains or does it plan to offer VIA Rail, whose management recently expressed

concern about acquiring suitable rolling stock for the potential resumption of the Montreal-Matapedia-Gaspé service?

"Our plan is not to replace VIA Rail. We haven't reached that point. We first want to assess the potential of the tourist train, like adding the Baie-des-Chaleurs, Carleton, Paspebiac, and onward to Percé. We are not silly. There is homework to do. However, we are not closing any doors. We are working on the tourist aspect. We decided a month ago to bring back the train that has been idle in Gaspé since 2014. I don't have \$30 million to entertain a dream. It is business talk," insists Éric Dubé.

Quebec's Department of Transport acquired the Matapedia to Gaspé line from the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie in 2015. At the time,

the SCFG lacked the financial means to upgrade the line but continued to operate freight trains with its locomotives and crews.

Transports Québec waited until May 2017 before announcing that the line, open between Matapedia and Caplan at the time, would be upgraded along its whole length to Gaspé.

Many factors, including the fact that Transports Québec went 20 months without issuing a call for tenders between June 2020 and February 2022, have delayed traffic resumption between Caplan and Port Daniel. Despite the setbacks, Transports Québec now assures that the line will reopen to Port Daniel by the end of 2024 and to Gaspé by the end of 2026.

In October, an agreement was signed to acquire 12 self-propelled Budd cars from a company called AllEarth Rail, a company based in Vermont. If acquired in the coming year, "they will make it possible to offer excursions at affordable cost and with a minimum threshold of passengers required to make operations profitable. This acquisition will also allow the SCFG to explore the development of tourist circuits," as highlighted in a press release by the transporter.

It's important to note that the SCFG is an entity controlled by the four MRCs covering the southern part of the Gaspé Peninsula.