

The Coalition of Gaspésians for the return of the passenger train gets astounding petition support

GILLES GAGNÉ

PORT DANIEL - As SPEC reached its deadline on April 21, the Coalition of Gaspésians for the Return of the Passenger Train had close to 13,500 signatures. In addition to signatures of support from Gaspésians, there are signatures of citizens from elsewhere in Quebec, as well as the other Canadian provinces. In less than three weeks, more than 13,000 people rushed to sign an online petition asking the federal government and VIA Rail to restore passenger train service between Matapédia and New Carlisle before the end of 2023. They also demanded the return of train service to Gaspé as quickly as possible. "I'm very happy with the results," says Coalition member, Anthony Bernard Prince.

According to Mr. Prince, for now, the petition will remain open with no concrete closing date. Close to 500 signatures are received daily and, on some days, more than 1,000 signatures are collected.

The Coalition of Gaspésians for the Return of the Passenger Train launched the petition on March 30. Gaspésians east of New Carlisle haven't had access to a passenger train service for over 11



Photo: G. Gagné

Since the summer of 2013, Matapédia is the only Gaspé Peninsula point served by VIA Rail as the train linking Montreal and Halifax stops there.

years. For the section between Matapédia and New Carlisle, the service has been absent for over nine years.

As the owner of the line since the spring of 2015, the Quebec Ministry of Transport and Sustainable Mobility funds the repair of the region's railway and bridges, thus likely making the resumption of train circulation, including VIA Rail's passenger, safe between Caplan and New Carlisle before the end of 2023.

The Coalition is therefore

asking the federal government and VIA Rail, a corporation owned by that level of government, to fulfill their legal mandate to provide adequate rail passenger transport services in the region.

The Coalition published in February a 15-page brief outlining the needs pressing the

region in this regard and advocating for the restoration of the service, even partially, as a first step. The lack of a passenger rail service causes significant harm to the entire region regarding access to health services and education. It affects the region's economy, tourism, environment

and social activities.

The Coalition is also seeking the support of municipal councils, prefects, provincial and federal politicians as well as socio-economic and community organizations in the region.

The signatories of the resolutions of support received by the Coalition are asking for the phased resumption of VIA Rail's service, starting with New Carlisle, by the end of this year, possibly relying on the regional bus service for passengers to the east. The supporters also ask for the resumption of service to Gaspé and intermediate points as soon as the condition of the railway infrastructure will allow it.

In the coming weeks, the Coalition intends to present the petition and other demonstrations of support to the Member of Parliament for the Gaspésie and Magdalen Islands riding Diane Lebouthillier, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Federal Minister of Transport Omar Alghabra and the new President of VIA Rail who has not yet been named.