

ESTABLISHED • MAY 1975

VOLUME 49 / NO 16, APRIL 26, 2023

Contract 40019680 \$1.50 (Tax included)

Transports Québec reduces investments in the Gaspé Peninsula and the Magdalen Islands by 13.5%

GILLES GAGNÉ

NEW RICHMOND - The Quebec Ministry of Transport and Sustainable Mobility will reduce its investments in the road, rail and airport networks of the Gaspé Peninsula and the Magdalen Islands by 13.5% during the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 budget years. The amount invested over these two years will go from \$350 million to \$302.5 million.

The biggest reduction will hit the rail network with total investments going from \$144.2 million for the years 2022 to 2024 to \$88.5 million from 2023 to 2025, a cut of \$57.7 million. Since 2013, the Quebec Ministry of Transport investment announcements span over two years and are adjusted annually, which complicates yearly follow-ups.

During an April 17 stop in the Gaspé Peninsula, Transport Minister Geneviève Guilbault downplayed the importance of the budget reduction relating to the rail network. She first specified that a sum of \$21 million had been granted during the Quebec budget in March to

help in its operation of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, the freight carrier using the network belonging to Transports Quebec. A portion of \$12.5 million relates to the 2023-2025 period and is not included in the April 17 announcement.

Minister Guilbault also specified that other amounts could be released before the summer for the Matapedia-Gaspé railway when Transports Québec will have completed the evaluation of the business case for the portion of the network located between Port Daniel and Gaspé.

"We have to go through the cabinet (ministers) in this case," said Geneviève Guilbault, specifying why large sums associated with this portion of the line are not announced now.

The 325 kilometres (202.4 miles) of rail between Matapedia and Gaspé are divided into three parts by Transports Québec, the 127-kilometre stretch between Matapedia-Caplan, on which rail service has been maintained continuously since the acquisition of the



The Minister of Transport and Sustainable Mobility, Geneviève Guilbault, indicated more money could come later this year for the Gaspé Peninsula railway.

Gaspé network by Transports Québec; the 72-kilometre, Caplan-Port Daniel section, which should be put back into service in 2024; and the 126-kilometre, Port Daniel-Gaspé section.

The Minister indicated that the Caplan-Port-Daniel portion will be put back into operation

at the end of 2024, a prudent deadline since most of the offers submitted by contractors carrying out the main bridge repair mandates will complete their work before the end of 2023, or early 2024.

As for the Port-Daniel-Gaspé stretch, the timetable for reopening in 2025 was not kept even if it had been announced in August 2019 by Premier François Legault. Minister why the rate of disbursement by Transports Québec only reached \$20 million per year between 2017 and 2022, including the first three years of the Coalition avenir Québec government, before accelerating to a certain degree a year ago. Since June 2018, more than \$7 billion has been invested in the Réseau express métropolitain (REM) in Montreal, at a rate of \$2 billion per year, considering that experts expect the cost of the initiative's first phase at close to \$10 billion.

The final cost of the REM remains unknown. Charles Émond, president of the main promoter of that initiative, namely the Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec, recently refused to divulge the last cost update of the REM. The \$7 billion evaluation is from June 2021.

To date, if the money injections of the last two years are included, \$142.5 million has been invested into the repair of the Gaspé rail network since May 2017, which equals \$23.75 million per year.

Reactions

For his part, the president of the Société du chemin de fer de



SCFG railway repair 2020: The repair of the Gaspé Peninsula railway line is behind schedule, but the pace of work has accelerated since the spring of 2022.

Guilbault confirmed that the ultimate goal remains unchanged.

"It's reasonable to assume that it will be completed in a few years, sooner rather than later," she said.

She explained the withdrawal from the initial schedule to "the reality of the market," the need to "operate with the administrative pace," the 2022 election, "overheating in the construction industry" during calls for tenders, and the cancellation of certain calls for tenders when prohibitive costs are presented. However, she did not explain, when questioned by The Gaspé Spec,

TRANSPORT: Cont'd from cover

Air transport: patience

Although Minister Guilbault recognizes the shortcomings of the Quebec Regional Air Transport Plan, she has no concrete measures to correct the situation. Air travel in Quebec's rural regions is marred by many factors, in particular flights cancelled for lack of planes or employees, the lack of seats on planes and a ticket discount program concocted for tourists rather than to meet the needs of the regions.

"We give ourselves a year to get there," she says about improvements, noting that "we must also wait for the expiry of the current programs."

She trusts the regional permanent committee, appointed during the winter and made up of the same people who established the essentials of the program heavily criticized since its inception in June 2022.

"We have to solve the problem of flexibility and frequency," she says.

The price of asphalt for municipalities:

Bonaventure airport. Asked about the prohibitive price of asphalt for municipali-In 2022-2023, the disburseties and the desire expressed ment rate for investments made since 2011 by certain mayors in the Gaspé Peninsula and the that Transports Québec's nego- Magdalen Islands by Transtiations with asphalt producers ports Québec was 89% of the can also benefit cities and vilamount announced. lages, Minister Guilbault an-Meanwhile, in Quebec, the swered that "it's part of the transport-related sums to be andiscussions" she has enternounced over the next few tained since her nomination in weeks will amount to \$7.43 billion between 2023 and 2025, October. The question was launched a historic high, indicated 12 years ago by the mayor of Geneviève Guilbault.

la Gaspésie, Éric Dubé, sees as "excellent news" the maintenance by Geneviève Guilbault of reopening the railway line to Gaspé.

He attributes the minister's cautious objective of reopening the Caplan-Port-Daniel stretch at the end of 2024 to a probable desire "to keep room for maneuvering."

The mayor of Gaspé, Daniel Côté, also expressed relief to see the Quebec government's willingness to repair the whole line. He now dates the return of rail service to his town "at 2027 or 2028."

Cont'd on page 10 🕦

Nouvelle at the time, Richard Saint-Laurent, who deplored that his municipality paid \$149 per tonne for asphalt, compared to the \$105 paid by Transports Québec, from the same supplier. Elected officials in the Gaspé have relaunched their plea to get cheaper asphalt prices many times since 2011, sometimes giving up, considering the ministry's reluctance at acting in collaboration with them.

Meanwhile, the roads of the Gaspé Peninsula and the Magdalen Islands will benefit from \$48.2 million between 2023 and 2025, for the improvement of the surface (mainly through new paving), compared to the \$56.1 million announced one year ago. An amount of \$54.6 million will be devoted to improving structures, compared to \$57.6 million for 2022 to 2024.

The amount earmarked for improvements aimed at making the network more efficient and safe will amount to \$106.7 million. It was \$85 million a year ago.

Airport projects will receive \$4.5 million between 2023 and 2025, slightly less than the \$6 million announced last year. It will essentially go to the

Page 10, April 26, 2023 - Spec