

VIA Rail to look for long-haul rolling stock replacement *Gaspé Peninsula service could benefit from the acquisition*

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND – In a bulletin issued by the Atlantic division of Transport Action Canada on February 14, VIA Rail Canada confirms “it is preparing a business case for the renewal of its aging long-haul locomotives and cars – some of which are more than 70 years old.”

Even if VIA Rail’s passenger trains have not circulated between Matapédia and Gaspé since December 2011, and not between Matapédia and New Carlisle since the end of the summer of 2013, these trains will return at one point, once the line is repaired to New Carlisle or Gaspé.

The passenger cars used by VIA Rail in 2013 in the Gaspé Peninsula were essentially built in the 1950s and correspond exactly to the long-haul rolling material that must be replaced at one point, sooner than later.

Port Daniel’s Anthony Bernard Prince, of the Coalition of Gaspésians for the Return of the Train, remarks that the matter of long-haul rolling stock is indeed of concern in the Gaspé Peninsula.

“VIA Rail will also eventually need a better fleet of

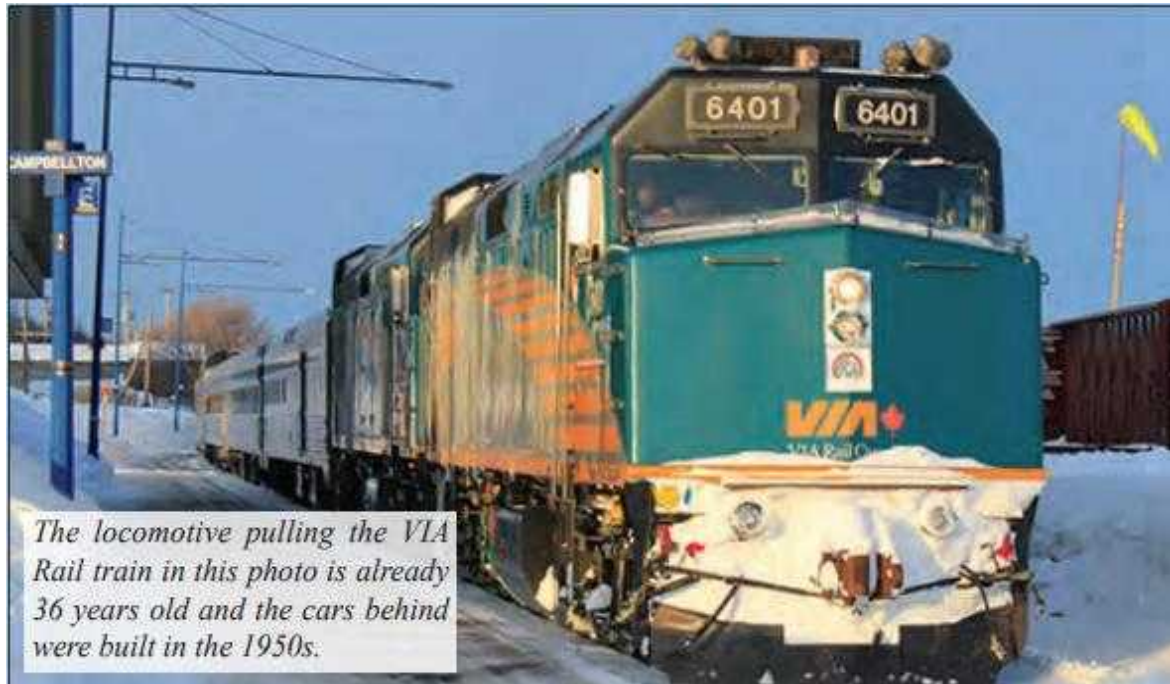


Photo: G. Gagné

cars for the Gaspé passenger train service. With an aging fleet, would VIA Rail even have enough cars to resume the service to New Carlisle in late 2023 or early 2024?” asks Mr. Prince.

The public transporter hosted a virtual “Market Day” event with suppliers on January 20 “to discuss the project and seek their input on various elements including schedule, budget, procurement and delivery timeline.”

Those discussions will provide valuable information to the federal government, which will ultimately have to decide

what the necessary funding will be.

In its bulletin, Transport Action Canada for the Atlantic region mentions that “the latest version of VIA’s 5-year Corporate Plan, which has just been released to the public, is rather pessimistic on how long the process will take, suggesting that delivery of new equipment may well be 10-15 years in the future.”

VIA Rail’s authorities have so far been discreet about which potential suppliers might be involved. The invitation posted in December, on the government’s public tendering

website was extended to “all tier 1 original equipment manufacturers of intercity and long-distance rail cars and locomotives.”

The January 20 virtual meeting was dedicated “to both informing the market about the fleet renewal opportunity and addressing the context of the Government of Canada’s 2022-2023 budget.”

A spokesperson from the VIA Rail headquarters mentioned that the participating suppliers at the market day came from “across the world,” but was not in a position to say how many there actually were.

Transport Action Canada’s post adds that “it’s a safe bet that Siemens Mobility will be among the contenders to at the very least build new locomotives. Siemens is already supplying 32 bi-directional trainsets to replace VIA’s entire corridor fleet by the end of 2024. The first of these is currently undergoing testing in real-life winter conditions, on the Alexandria Sub, between Ottawa and Coteau, Quebec. The testing is reportedly going well and entry into revenue service is set to take place later this year.”

Siemens is currently building 125 long-distance locomotives for Amtrak, the American public rail passenger transporter.

Alstom, which acquired Bombardier Transportation including its Canadian train-building operations in Thunder Bay and La Pocatière; Stadler, with experience in supplying dome cars to the North American market; and CAF, another American company, are also among the most likely potential bidders.

Hitachi, CRRC and other passenger car manufacturers

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may also be interested in entering the North American overnight train market, the reason being Amtrak’s likely move to soon replace its Superliner fleet, parts of which are now 40 years old.

A large order from Amtrak might have an effect in Canada “because there is no “off the shelf” product line from any one car builder that would come close to offering all the car types and passenger amenities of the Budd-built stainless steel fleet, so some new engineering, development, and testing will no doubt be required, which explains VIA’s long anticipated timeline for procurement,” mentions Transport Action Canada’s Atlantic news bulletin.

The commuter transport advocacy group also reports

that the union representing many of VIA’s employees wants Ottawa to pour “significant dollars into the corporation’s long-haul fleet renewal, and it views the Halifax-Montreal Ocean train as a priority. Unifor spokesperson Scott Doherty told the Campbellton Tribune that upgrading passenger rail transportation is a major goal nationwide. He said that the Trudeau government needs to follow the lead of the Biden White House, which has just committed to the largest public investment in Amtrak’s entire history.”

“It can’t just be fast rail service from Toronto to Ottawa or Montreal to Windsor,” said Scott Doherty. “That can’t be the only place where investments get made.” He pointed out that rail travel is “a green, environmentally acknowledged form of transportation, and it has to be affordable.”