

Increased support for the return of the passenger train to the Gaspé Peninsula

GILLES GAGNÉ

NEW RICHMOND – The Coalition of Gaspésians for the Return of the Passenger Train continues to try to persuade VIA Rail to resume services between Matapédia and Gaspé in phases before the end of 2024.

Signatures were collected, both online and in person, at various public events attended by Coalition members over the past year. As of March 26; 18,506 people had signed the petition demanding the return of the train.

Moreover, this support comes without conventional advertising from the Coalition. Additionally, 27 of the 29 municipalities located between Matapédia and Percé adopted a resolution asking VIA Rail to bring the train back to a portion of the Matapédia-Gaspé network once repairs are carried out as far as New Carlisle.

Since this section will be reopened to New Carlisle by late fall, the Coalition is asking VIA Rail to resume services to New Carlisle before the end of the year. Currently, the Matapédia-Gaspé section is operational between Matapédia and New Richmond for freight only, covering a distance of 110 kilometres (70 miles). New Carlisle is located 43 kilometres (28 miles) from New Richmond, with major bridge repair work underway between both points. The track is being moved to the north in an area of Black Cape, in New Richmond, but that contract will be finished before the fall.

Cynthia Patterson, spokesperson for the Coalition of Gaspésians Gaspésiens for the Return of the Train, is looking forward to speaking again with the president of VIA Rail, Mario Pélouquin, who demonstrated more openness during a meeting in Montreal in November compared to his predecessors

“We were supposed to see each other again at the start of the year, in the Gaspé, but the meeting was postponed twice. We are now supposed to meet him on April 22. We have done a lot of research work since November 1,” says Ms. Patterson.

Resuming the service is feasible

Research conducted by the Coalition addresses four points raised by Mario Pélouquin in November as potential obsta-



Photo: G. Gagné

Cynthia Patterson believes that the obstacles perceived by the president of VIA Rail can be ironed out without too much hassle.

cles to the prompt return of the passenger train. These include rolling stock availability, personnel recruitment, the condition of train stations and accessibility to the railway network belonging to the Quebec Ministry of Transport, so that VIA Rail can inspect it before resuming service.

“Regarding the shortage of rolling stock, we have been doing extensive research across Canada into passenger cars, into what is not being used by VIA Rail, and what could be available with Amtrak in the United States. We found enough material to reestablish a basic Montreal-New Carlisle service according to a three, round trip, per week schedule and challenge the obstacle raised by Mr. Pélouquin. It now remains for VIA Rail to make it a priority and allocate the rolling stock there,” assures Cynthia Patterson.

“The personnel question is not complicated. You can't get workers if you don't advertise positions. I am sure that these positions will find takers. The stations are not an obstacle either. The New Carlisle, New Richmond, Carleton and Matapédia stations are in good condition,” she adds.

The Coalition believes a solution can be found to replace the highly vandalized Bonaventure station. Ms. Patterson also believes there is still time to upgrade certain stations between New Carlisle and Gaspé. The complete reopening of this line is planned for the fall of 2026.

The section between New Carlisle and Port-Daniel is expected to open for freight traffic before the end of 2024 or early

2025.

In November, the president of VIA Rail mentioned that they had not yet been granted access to the Gaspé section by Transports Québec to conduct inspections for passenger services.

“We want the Quebec government to invite VIA Rail to inspect the railway line as soon as it is ready to New Carlisle. We think this process will be relatively simple,” underlines Cynthia Patterson, who now has over 35 years of activism under her belt in advocating for rail services in the Gaspé Peninsula.

“We are constantly working on our requests through correspondence. I am happy to see that Mr. Pélouquin is proactive, that he is asking the federal government for funds to increase the fleet of passenger cars, which is constantly being done in Europe and which we want to see here,” notes Ms. Patterson.

“At the public events we attended throughout the fall, people told us how much they need passenger rail. We will resume our public presence soon,” she promises.

Patience

VIA Rail suspended its service between Matapédia and New Carlisle in September 2013, marking over 10 years since the suspension which was primarily due to the state of some bridges. The public carrier had ceased its service between New Carlisle and Gaspé for similar reasons in December 2011.

Since the spring of 2015, the railway section between

Matapédia and Gaspé, spanning 325 kilometres (202 miles), has been under the ownership of the Quebec Ministry of Transport. However, it wasn't until May 2017 that Transports Québec decided to repair the entire railway. In addition, no major work was carried out before the beginning of 2019.

Transports Québec has since fallen considerably behind in the pace of work, particularly between June 2020 and February 2022, when no call for tenders for the repair of the bridges was published.

A total budget of \$872 million is dedicated to the complete refurbishment of the Matapédia-Gaspé line, including \$517 million required for the section between Port Daniel and Gaspé.

Freight transport between Matapédia and New Richmond is provided by the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie (SCFG), an entity under the control of the four MRCs covering the territory between Matapédia and Gaspé. The SCFG will also offer freight services to Port-Daniel and Gaspé.

Freight traffic declined in 2022 and 2023 in the Gaspé

Peninsula because Transports Québec was unable to fulfill its commitment to repair the line to Port Daniel.

This prevents cement traffic from increasing, especially when relatively close destinations, like southern New Brunswick, are concerned. There is a road-railway transshipment facility in New Richmond but load transfer is not advantageous financially over shorter routes. What leaves Port Daniel in a truck and trailer, then stays in the trailer until its destination. Input for the Saint Mary's cement plant could also be hauled by rail but the same transshipment constraint makes the operation more expensive.

In 2021, the SCFG hauled 4,636 carloads, compared to 3,150 in 2022 and 1,998 last year. Cement plant-related traffic was expected to make up for the May 2022 end of windmill blade traffic generated by LM Wind Power in Gaspé.

That traffic was also transhipped in New Richmond due to the state of the railway infrastructure east of New Richmond. LM Wind Power will likely generate some traffic once the line is repaired to Gaspé.