

# \$561M cut for rail in the transportation program for the Gaspé Peninsula and Magdalen Islands

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GASPÉ - The Quebec government has cut \$561 million from the road, airport, and rail program in the investment plan for the Gaspé Peninsula and Magdalen Islands spanning over the 2025-2027 period. The sum was essentially deducted from the refurbishment of the Gaspé railway network.

From \$680 million for 2024-2026, the planned spending is now only \$119 million for the next two years. The status change of the Port Daniel to Gaspé section, from an implementation mode to a planning mode, explains the discrepancy in the amounts.

"We still have major projects underway on Section 3, mainly structures—bridges and culverts—for the next construction season," said Gaspé Member of the National Assembly (MNA) Stéphane Sainte-Croix at a press conference on May 12 in Gaspé.

"We have 15 projects underway on section 3. Nine are in operation. We're on hold on six projects, trying to find solutions to complete them," added his colleague from Bonaventure, Catherine Blouin.

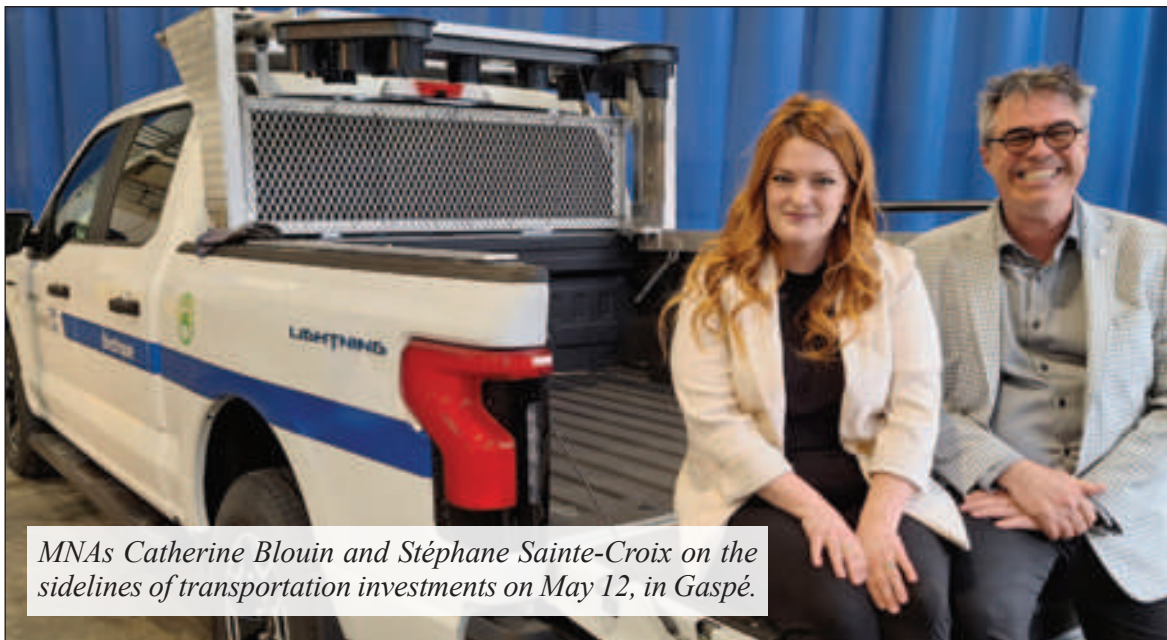
For Transports Québec, the ministry that has owned the Matapédia-Gaspé railroad since the spring of 2015, there are three sections along that line. Section 1 covers the Matapédia to Caplan stretch, while Section 2 goes from Caplan to Port Daniel, and Section 3 goes from Port Daniel to Gaspé.

"The money announced last year was for sections 2 and 3," explained the Gaspé MNA.

When the \$304 million investment for roads, airports, and rail was announced, elected officials explained what's happening with the rail rehabilitation project.

No date for reaching Gaspé is yet foreseeable, after having postponed the deadline several times since 2018.

"All sorts of things are being studied. The ultimate goal is to reach Gaspé, but we want to try to achieve economies of scale. Can we save money by buying in bulk? There's also a committee formed by the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie and the ministry to try to save money and optimize certain



MNAs Catherine Blouin and Stéphane Sainte-Croix on the sidelines of transportation investments on May 12, in Gaspé.

Photo: N. Sergerie

projects. For example, on certain structures, can we reduce speed or loads to save money? This type of analysis is underway," suggests the MNA for Bonaventure.

The railway company could even obtain projects to carry out in order to save money.

## Change of strategy on Transports Québec's part

"In the current economic climate, it's wise to take a step back. We're in no rush to move forward with the \$150 million cost overruns. We're also trying to split some contracts to involve our local investors," notes Ms. Blouin.

This is a reversal of the situation, as Quebec had grouped contracts to create critical mass to attract major players and generate economies of scale during Premier François Legault's last visit in November 2023.

"We're working to move the projects on hold into construction mode. We're not worried about the intention to complete the rail line. Our intention is to go to Gaspé. If we have to go through different options for construction, we'll do it," emphasizes Mr. Sainte-Croix.

## Potential customers

Osisko Metals, the company currently working on resuming mining activities in Murdochville, indicates that it may need the rail line to ship ore to Rouyn-Noranda.

"We have some flexibility with this client. He's (company president Robert Wares) following this closely. We'll see where Osisko will be positioned moving forward," maintains the MNA for Gaspé, as the company could

need the train in the early 2030s.

Regarding the debate surrounding the 300-metre protection zone for a railway line, which is raging particularly in the Rocher-Percé MRC, a committee including the Ministry of Transportation and Municipal Affairs is looking into the issue.

"There is a significant concern in our community. It has been addressed. We don't see any major issues to identify possible solutions," believes the MNA for Gaspé.

On the sidelines of the May 12 announcement, the president of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie indicated that the Quebec government had asked him to suspend his own planning for work on section 3.

"We were asked to pause the planning of work scheduled for 2025," said Éric Dubé, following the return of Section 3 from implementation mode to analysis, or planning, mode.

The company, which is owned by the municipalities located between Matapédia and Gaspé, had been allocated \$36 million to carry out smaller projects on the final section.

"For us, it was a four-year work plan. We had planned equipment purchases last year. We had ordered them. We will receive them in the coming weeks. Had we known this a year ago, we might not have invested so much in specialized equipment to carry out this work," stated the president.

When the company pointed out to the Quebec government that funds had been committed and that suppliers would still want to be paid, negotiations took place. "The ministry is aware of the

impacts on the company," said the president.

During the press briefing for the Gaspésie MNAs, it was mentioned that the railway currently has no customers east of Port-Daniel-Gascons.

"The reality is that if we had waited to receive letters for needs, we must remember that in 2013-2014, there was no one. Today, we are at between 3,000 and 4,000 freight cars. We had no signed contracts. If the railway had been operating all the way to Gaspé for 10 years, would the tip of the Gaspésie have lost opportunities? The answer is probably yes," said Mr. Dubé, reiterating that it is a significant development tool for the region.

It's a kind of chicken-or-egg situation. "If it takes us another 10 years to get there, the chicken might never lay any eggs," he says.

If the rail line had been repaired all the way to Gaspé, the LM Wind Power blade plant in Gaspé wouldn't have trucked blades to New Richmond between November 2016 and May 2022.

Mr. Dubé doesn't want to miss another opportunity considering the possible revival of Mines Gaspé by Osisko. "There's huge volume potential. I understand that everyone can say yes, we have time because it's 2030 or 2032. But if we want to be ready, given what we've experienced in the last year, 2030 isn't too far off," comments Mr. Dubé.

## Roads

Of the \$304 million allocated for the next two years, \$185 million is earmarked for paving and bridges.

Thus, \$48,837,000 is earmarked to improve roadway conditions, \$59,871,000 to improve structural conditions, \$71,432,000 to make the network efficient and safe, including to follow up on recommendations from the Coroner's Office, and \$4,780,000 to implement airport projects. "That's over \$4 million more for the road network alone," notes Ms. Blouin.

As for criticisms of the state of the paving on highway 132 in Baie-des-Chaleurs, the MNA for Bonaventure assures that efforts will be made.

(With the collaboration of Gilles Gagné)