

Mobilization for the refurbishment of the railway to Gaspé

NELSON SERGERIE
 LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE

GASPÉ – About 75 people responded to the September 6 invitation of the Mobilization Table on Rail Transportation in the Gaspésie to demand the resumption of VIA Rail services in the region and the complete rehabilitation of the railway line between Port Daniel and Gaspé as soon as possible.

Carol Saucier, spokesperson of Mobilization Table of Rail Transportation, pointed out that "We want to demonstrate once again to the Quebec government and VIA Rail our unwavering commitment to getting the train back on track as soon as possible."

Recalling that Quebec had paused rail rehabilitation last March, Mr. Saucier noted that the major problem is the lack of a timeline for reaching Gaspé, stressing that the train was scheduled to return to Gaspé in early 2027.

"We are asking the Ministry of Transport to relaunch the pending calls for tenders. We are asking the Quebec government to reinstate the Gaspé rail rehabilitation project in the Quebec Infrastructure Program. We are also asking for the necessary funding to be guaranteed to complete the work to Gaspé," Carol Saucier demanded, also calling for the gradual return of VIA Rail to Gaspé.

From Port Daniel, Coalition of Gaspesians for the Return of Passenger trains spokesperson Micheline



Photos: N. Sergerie

In Gaspé, there were about 75 people calling for the resumption of work on the track to Gaspé.

Saint-Onge spoke with the Gaspé attendees and once again deplored VIA's position of refusing to return to the Gaspé Peninsula until the track is rehabilitated all the way to Gaspé.

Old bridges

Ms. Saint-Onge notes that the amount of money required to repair the rail line seems colossal, but points out that a couple of old bridges were built in 1893 before being replaced.

"The annual investment is still quite relative. For example, on Highway 132, over the past few years, \$93 million has been invested. We must keep in mind that the investment in the rail line to Gaspé is an amount spread over the next 30 years," notes

the spokesperson.

At the political level, the elected officials recalled the fight they have been waging since 2013 to convince various governments to invest in the Gaspé line.

On site in Gaspé, Éric Dubé, president of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, noted that he could soon be dealing with a sixth Minister of Transport since becoming president in 2014.

"We will never give up on the complete rehabilitation of the railway, whether for goods or people, all the way to Gaspé," says Mr. Dubé.

"Today, the signal that the population is sending throughout the region is a good message to remember two things: the railway belongs to the Government of Quebec and VIA Rail is fed-

erally managed. Local elected officials, in each MRC, will not give up the fight," assures Mr. Dubé.

Gaspé Mayor Daniel Côté took a few moments to summarize all the steps taken since 2013. He recalled that in 2014, efforts to refurbish the railway were going nowhere, referring to Father Labelle in the Laurentians, who had fought since the 1860s for a train linking Montreal and Mont-Laurier. In 2016-2017, after several meetings, the region's politicians of the time succeeded in obtaining \$100 million from Philippe Couillard's government, which was announced in 2017 in New Carlisle.

In 2019, Mr. Côté recalled that, along with Éric Dubé and the former prefect of the Rocher-Percé MRC, Nadia Minassian, they met with Premier François Legault.

"When we left the office, he was convinced and he said it publicly: I am committed to rebuilding the railway to Gaspé. He didn't say at all costs, but almost," notes Mr. Côté, who also refers to the \$45.8 million the federal government contributed in the meantime.

"We also see that the political directions, which were so clear in 2019 and in the following years, have become less and less clear to the point where the project has disappeared from the PQI (Quebec Infrastructure Program)," recalls Mr. Côté, noting that the premier Legault is now trying to shift the debate onto the federal govern-

ment. "For me, it's a diversion. I don't want to have a diversion, either between us or on the national scene. We have to keep the objective: ultimately, it's to have a functional line to Gaspé. No track, no train. Let's keep that in mind," says Mr. Côté.

"This is not the time to throw in the towel. We have political promises and they must be honored until the end. Let's continue to do as Father Labelle did, and we'll have our railway. Not just the upper classes," the mayor of Gaspé strongly asserted.

Closing the speeches, the Member of Parliament for Gaspésie-Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine-Listuguj, Alexis Deschênes, attempted to demolish all the arguments against rehabilitation regarding costs, profitability, and the complexity of the work.

"A human resources director for a major company in Gaspé told me this summer that if the train came back, it would be even easier to attract workers from outside," the federal elected official noted.

Like he had mentioned in New Carlisle earlier that day, he pointed out that transportation infrastructure will never be profitable.

"If we compare, there's \$9 billion invested in the REM in Montreal. We don't want to take anything away from them. It's just for comparison. For the (Quebec City-Lévis) Third link, \$10 billion in public investments is planned from the Quebec government, and a month ago, it released \$275 million," explains Mr. Deschênes.

He also notes that the Montreal metro's operating deficit is \$125 million annually, and public transit buses cost \$1 billion a year in the metropolitan area. "The profitability argument is not an argument," he says.

Bonaventure Member of the National Assembly (MNA) Catherine Blouin attended the Carleton-sur-Mer rally.

Gaspé MNA Stéphane Sainte-Croix was unable to attend due to a long-standing commitment, he informed organizers.

In August 2019, a similar rally in Gaspé had attracted about 150 people.



Éric Dubé, president of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie; Daniel Côté, mayor of Gaspé; Carol Saucier, spokesperson for the Mobilization Table on Rail Transportation in Gaspé; and Alexis Deschênes, Member of Parliament for Gaspésie-Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine-Listuguj, were at the Gaspé rally, held at the intermodal station.