

More than 10,000 Gaspesians likely take the Montreal-Halifax train annually

GILLES GAGNÉ

MARIA – A recent compilation reveals that between 12,000 and 13,000 Gaspesians likely take the VIA Rail Montreal-Halifax train each year, despite considerable obstacles to getting there, including having to drive to the train station in either Matapédia or Campbellton, New Brunswick.

This compilation was made by the Coalition of Gaspesians for the Return of the VIA Rail Passenger Train, which has been campaigning for 12 years, for the national carrier to return east of the village of Matapédia as soon as possible. Some passengers reportedly drive up to four hours just to catch the train.

VIA Rail suspended the Montreal-Gaspé route in two stages, ceasing service between New Carlisle and Gaspé in December 2011 and along the Matapédia-New Carlisle stretch in September 2013, due

to the condition of the tracks and above all certain bridges.

The calculation by Coalition spokesperson Micheline Saint-Onge is based on data provided by VIA Rail, considering the postal codes of users living in the Gaspé Peninsula. In 2024, 2,471 Gaspé residents boarded or disembarked the train in Campbellton, and 172 in Matapédia, for a total of 2,643 people. These stations are two stops on the Halifax-Montreal train, which makes this route three times a week.

"VIA Rail provided us with this data on the basis that these passengers have the VIA Preference card. VIA has the postal codes of the holders of this card, except that only 21% of VIA Rail users have the card. We can therefore multiply this number of 2,643 people by five to get an idea of the total number of residents from the Gaspé taking the train to travel," explains Ms. Saint-Onge.



Micheline Saint-Onge notes that thousands of Gaspesians take the Halifax-Montreal train annually, which is enough to give them their own train.

Photos: G. Gagné

A rule of three would accurately give a number of 12,585 passengers per year, but that's not all, she adds.

"Our calculation doesn't take into account people living

in other regions who use the train to get here. There are quite a few, given that many native Gaspé residents live outside the region. This also doesn't include tourists. Some

hotels even pick up their guests in Campbellton," explains Ms. Saint-Onge.

For years, VIA Rail management has stipulated that it will not return to the Gaspé Peninsula until the track is repaired all the way to Gaspé. Transports Québec, which acquired the Matapédia-Gaspé railroad in the spring of 2015, is working on its rehabilitation, but the work is at least three years behind schedule.

VIA Rail management also maintains that a rolling stock availability issue is preventing it from returning to the Gaspé Peninsula immediately. Micheline Saint-Onge vigorously rejects this argument.

"There are at least 12,000 or 13,000 people, and probably quite a few more, who come to or leave the Gaspé Peninsula by train. These people are already in the passenger cars. So, let's give us back

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the rolling stock that would allow us to get our train back as quickly as possible," she says.

When VIA Rail operated the Montreal-Gaspé train, with three round trips per week until 2011, between 23,000 and 29,000 people travelled annually, approximately 185 per trip.

A productive round of public meetings

Micheline Saint-Onge completed a tour of eight meetings held between Matapédia and Paspébiac at the end of March. These meetings attracted just over 150 people who strongly called for the train's return to New Carlisle as soon as possible, and to Gaspé as soon as the line was repaired.

In addition to congratulating Micheline Saint-Onge for her "Extremely solid argument on public transit in the context of climate change," Jean-Eudes Pinard, a participant in the Maria meeting, was calmly but firmly critical of VIA Rail.

"I was the last attendant at



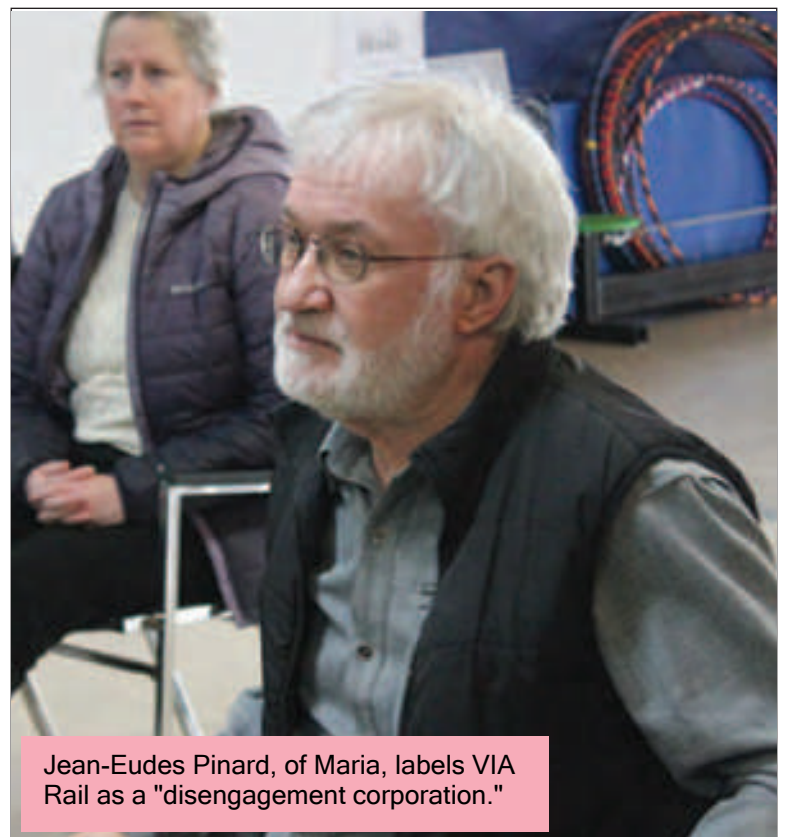
Marie-Josée Racine wonders why MNA Catherine Blouin doesn't support the Coalition of Gaspesians for the Return of VIA Rail's Passenger Train.

the Maria station in 1985. VIA Rail, since its creation in 1977, has been a disengagement company. (...) It closed several stations in a single wave at the time, theoretically to improve service, hoping to shorten travel times. But the journey time didn't shorten, and ridership declined," Mr. Pinard said.

Also from Maria, Marie-Josée Racine expressed surprise at the low number of federal and provincial politi-

cians who signed letters of support for the Coalition of Gaspesians for the Return of VIA Rail's Passenger Trains. Micheline Saint-Onge indicated in March, before the current electoral campaign, only the outgoing Bloc Québécois Member of Parliament, Kristina Michaud, expressed support for the movement.

"How is it that Member of the National Assembly (Catherine) Blouin doesn't officially support the return of



Jean-Eudes Pinard, of Maria, labels VIA Rail as a "disengagement corporation."

the passenger train?" asked Ms. Racine, referring to the Coalition avenir Québec elected representative for Bonaventure.

Locomotives can turn in New Carlisle. This is why the town is chosen as a first step for service resumption. The railway between New Richmond and Port Daniel is supposed to reopen in June or July, as track and bridge upgrading work will be completed.

For now, traffic resumption

to Port Daniel is mainly motivated by cement hauling. Freight trains don't have to turn there because they are almost always pulled by two locomotives placed in a back-to-back position.

In contrast, VIA Rail's passenger train in the Gaspé Peninsula is generally pulled by a single locomotive, with a single cab at one end of it. Some European locomotives, however, are equipped with two cabs at both ends.