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Setback for Port-Daniel-Gaspé railway refurbishment

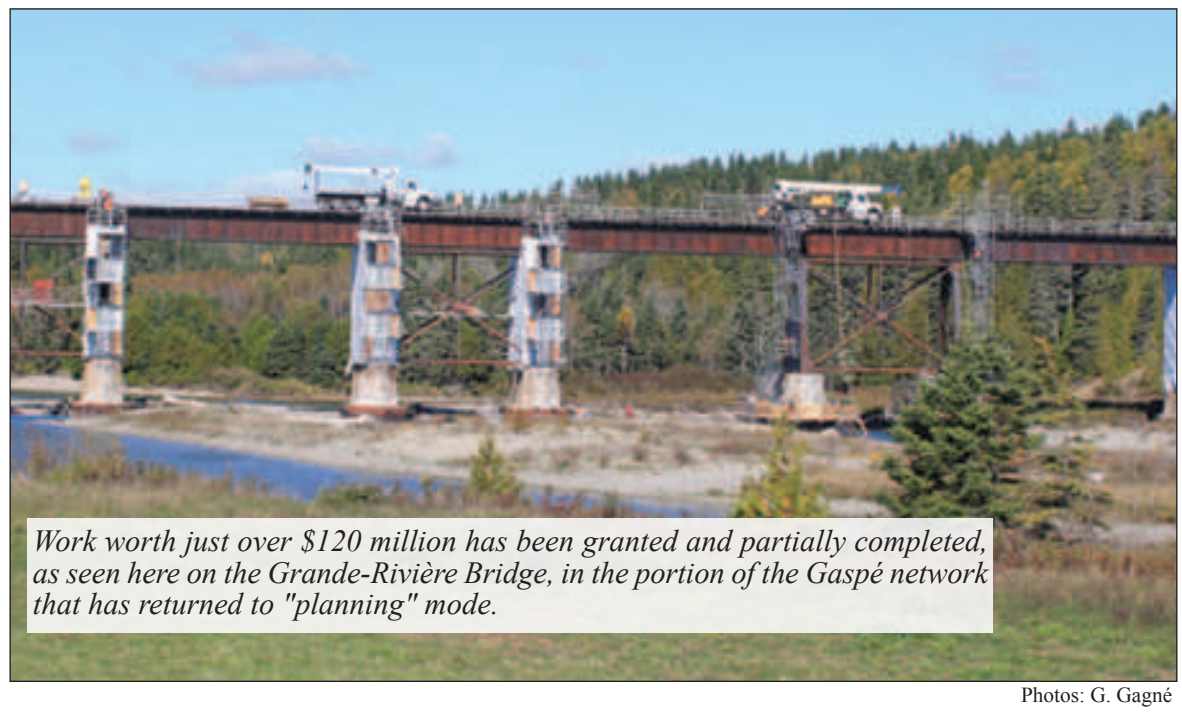
GILLES **GAGNÉ**

NEW RICHMOND – The Quebec government has postponed the refurbishment of the railway between Port-Daniel and Gaspé, reducing it to "planning" rather than "implementation," the status it held before the March 25 budget. Politicians and citizens in the Gaspé Peninsula are irritated and concerned about the change in status.

The Quebec government has repeatedly committed to completing the rehabilitation of the 325-kilometre Matapedia-Gaspé railway section. The project was announced on May 5, 2017, and has been confirmed numerous times, including in June 2023 by Transport Minister Geneviève Guilbault, and again the following November by Premier François Legault.

Éric Dubé, mayor of New Richmond and president of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, was unpleasantly surprised to learn of the delay in the refurbishment project when he was informed on the evening of March 25 that he would receive a call from a representative of Transports Québec, the owner of the railway since 2015.

"We certainly didn't see it coming, that the remaining work on section 3 (Port-Daniel-Gaspé) is back in the planning stages. I don't know the consequences, but it's reasonable to assume that it will result in additional investments and a delay. Does this jeopardize the project? I can't answer. We're expecting a meeting with the people from Transports-Québec shortly," said Éric Dubé.



Work worth just over $120 million has been granted and partially completed, as seen here on the Grande-Rivière Bridge, in the portion of the Gaspé network that has returned to "planning" mode.

Photos: G. Gagné

The Matapedia-Gaspé railway rehabilitation project has a budget of $872 million since June 2023. Of this total, $517 million was earmarked for the Port-Daniel-Gaspé route, a 127-kilometre stretch characterized by rugged terrain and several bridges.

To date, just over $120 million in contracts have been awarded for this section. Some rehabilitation work on the railway itself has been completed since 2020, but several bridges remain to be repaired.

Éric Dubé is aware that the $872 million sum must be increased in light of cancelled calls for tenders in recent months because they were too high.

"The last time we looked at the tender results, there was a shortfall of $150 million. We're aware that a lot of money would be lost if we accepted these calls for tenders. The government wants to break them up to see if savings could be made, but any delay risks increasing the bill. We were expecting the calls for tenders to be issued in the spring. We're falling back into uncertainty, a buzzword these days. We're falling back into planning reassessment. That's all I know. There are no clear guidelines. Does that put the project (between Port-Daniel and Gaspé) in jeopardy? I don't know," adds Éric Dubé.

Ten years ago, a study estimated the total cost of upgrading the Gaspé railway at $122 million, but the Quebec government's delayed decision to proceed with this upgrade, the escalating costs during the pandemic, and numerous postponements in the publication of calls for tenders since 2020 have contributed to the ballooning bill.

Despite nearly eight years having passed since the announcement of the refurbishment of the entire Gaspé railway network on May 5, 2017, not a single additional kilometre of track has been made available to the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie (SCFG), a municipally-controlled entity created in two waves, in 1996 and 2007, to save the region's network from abandonment. The railway is currently operational between Matapedia and New Richmond, a distance of 112 kilometers.

During the summer, the railway will reopen to the Port-Daniel cement plant, a further 86 kilometres. Cement is already among the commodities transported by the SCFG, but from New Richmond, and after a costly truck-to-railcar transshipment between the two points.

Éric Dubé intends to clarify the Quebec government plans for the Gaspé railway as soon as possible.

No money for the Quebec Infrastructure Program

A look at the 2025-2035 Quebec Infrastructure Program reveals that the "planning" referred to in the government's budget documents does not allocate any new money to the Gaspé railway in terms of "implementation" for the budget year beginning April 1.

A sum of $259.7 million appeared in the same document a year ago.

A regional development consultant and former Minister of Regional Development, Gaétan Lelièvre, from Gaspé, is more concerned than ever about the delays in completing the railway refurbishment project, a project to which he has devoted considerable time as a volunteer.

"The railway refurbishment project has been put on hold. There's no new funding. It's a step backward! It means the planning hasn't been finalized and the government is no longer committed to carrying out work. What will come of the planning? This is the first time in years that we haven't had any money for new work. Once a project is on hold, is it possible that the conclusions regarding the complete rehabilitation of the network will change?" The government had initially set the (completion) timeline for 2026. We're a long way from the cut-off date. If we want to finish by 2028, the new deadline, we have work to do. When a project is put on hold in the government, it's worrisome," laments Mr. Lelièvre.

Additional concerns for the passenger train

Anthony Bernard Prince, of Port-Daniel, who has been involved in the Coalition of Gaspésiens for the Return of VIA Rail's Passenger Train for 10 years and has been an observer of the railway scene for 15 years, is very disappointed with this turn of events.

"I'm disappointed but not surprised. When the government announced another postponement of the delivery of a functional railway to Port-Daniel and Gaspé, it was supposed to issue revised calls for tenders before the spring, and to break them up. Since they weren't published until spring, I thought we'd lose the 2025 construction season. That's certain now," Mr. Prince added.

"However, I don't see them (the government) abandoning the Port-Daniel-Gaspé refurbishment. There's already significant work done, and there's great potential for LM Wind Power (a wind turbine blade manufacturer) in Gaspé. Furthermore, if the Murdochville mine reopening project succeeds, there will be a great need for rail transportation from Gaspé," Mr. Prince continued.

"What concerns me most is the return of passenger trains. VIA Rail's goal is to return to the Gaspé only when the railway is operational all the way to Gaspé. If we can offer VIA a guaranteed return date to Gaspé, it could encourage its management to return in stages, something we've been asking the Coalition for for years. In the absence of a return date to Gaspé, VIA Rail people may think that the project will be cancelled, and use that as an excuse not to return," he fears.

Gaspé Mayor Daniel Côté laments that the Gaspé region risks fighting again for infrastructure from which it should already be reaping the full benefits.

"On the one hand, we need to get all the information from the Ministry of Transport, specifically the Project Monitoring Office. From what we're seeing, we've fallen back into 'planning' and feasibility studies. It's a bitter disappointment. If that's true, we're back in the fight. This infrastructure is owed to us. The government has twice committed to delivering it to us in 2023, and that delivery has already been delayed several times," says Mr. Côté.

VIA Rail's passenger train service has been suspended in the Gaspé region since December 2011 between New Carlisle and Gaspé, and since the summer of 2013 between Matapédia and New Carlisle, due to the state of the infrastructure.