

The VIA Rail issue hits the electoral campaign

GILLES GAGNÉ

CARLETON – On April 7, the Coalition of Gaspésians for the Return of VIA Rail's Passenger Trains received a second political endorsement, and it came again from the Bloc Québécois, as candidate Alexis Deschênes seeks election in the Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine-Listuguj riding.

"The people of the Gaspésie are being cheated by VIA Rail. In fact, VIA Rail is insulting the people of the Gaspésie, and it's normal for them to feel cheated. They pay taxes to Ottawa for a service they don't receive," said Mr. Deschênes, alluding to the fact that the federal government has funded VIA's rolling stock and train operations to the tune of \$812.5 million in 2023.

When the Montreal-Gaspé train was still running three round trips weekly, its annual grant hovered around \$5 million to \$6 million. Since 2013, the public transporter has used the money on other routes.

Mr. Deschênes also noted that the Quebec government has so far injected \$355 million to repair the railway to Port-Daniel, which will soon ensure the network's availabil-

ity to New Carlisle.

The Bloc Québécois candidate deplored the role played so far by his Liberal rival Diane Lebouthillier. "In 2023, when the section was to be completed, she said 'good luck' sarcastically. She tried to belittle the people fighting to get it (the train) back by saying 'I won't get on it.'" She's an obstacle. (...) She's fighting with VIA against us instead of fighting with us against VIA."

He believes that by constantly putting pressure on VIA Rail once elected in Ottawa, he will be able to reverse the transporter's decision.

The Coalition of Gaspésians for the Return of VIA Rail's Passenger Train has so far collected 19,500 signatures from people demanding VIA Rail's cooperation in returning to New Carlisle and Gaspé in phases. It also invites the public to become a member of the organization.

Its spokesperson, Micheline Saint-Onge, insists that the Coalition is not taking a political stand.

"It is not us adopting the Bloc's position. It is the Bloc that is adopting the Coalition's position. If Diane Lebouthillier invites us to at-



Photo: G. Gagné

If elected, Alexis Deschênes of the Bloc Québécois intends to negotiate with VIA Rail for an early return of the train between Matapédia and New Carlisle.

tend a meeting, we will go, if it is not in Gaspé, but I doubt that she will," says Ms. Saint-Onge, who believes the outgoing Member of Parliament has had many opportunities to support the Coalition.

Micheline Saint-Onge is asking VIA Rail to resume the service to New Carlisle as soon as the line is functional

there. For seven years now, the management of the transporter has affirmed that it will only come back, east of Matapédia, when the line is fully repaired as far as Gaspé.

On March 25, the Quebec government published a Quebec Infrastructure Plan that put back the Port Daniel-Gaspé section of the line in a planning stage, instead of a full refurbishment stage. The reason was a cost overrun of \$150 million.

However, the two Members of the National Assembly representing the Gaspé Peninsula, Catherine Blouin and Stéphane Saint-Croix, affirmed a week later that the setback will lead to a better cost-control, without putting the Port Daniel-Gaspé project in jeopardy. The reopening date remains unknown for now but the 2027 goal seems out of reach.

Tourists anxious to take the train

Meanwhile, tourists familiar with the Gaspé Peninsula follow the train issue closely. Yolande Lemieux, a resident of Montreal, wrote to the SPEC to express her desire to

come back to the region.

"I'm older and I love the Gaspé Peninsula. Three years ago, I decided to take the train to get there, to Percé specifically, because I no longer wanted to drive all the way from Montreal. At that time, there was a paid bus service, VIA Rail, that would pick us up and take us back to Campbellton. Two years ago, I wanted to do the same thing, but there were no more buses serving VIA Rail and no buses from the Baie des Chaleurs either. So, I had to cancel my trip and I was no longer able to go to the Gaspé Peninsula," explains Ms. Lemieux.

While waiting for the train to come back east of Matapédia, she hopes her letter will convince the public transporter and regional authorities of the relevance of resuming the RÉGIM bus link between Gaspé and New Carlisle, for example.

"When I used them (the buses), they were full, round trip. On the way, there were, among others, two Tunisians who were arriving to study at the CEGEP in Gaspé. Now, what are they doing to get there?" wonders Ms. Lemieux.