

VIA Rail called to order by 400 Gaspesians who want their passenger train service back

GILLES GAGNÉ

NEW CARLISLE AND PORT-DANIEL – Approximately 400 Gaspesians gathered on September 6 at seven train stations between Matapédia and Gaspé demanding that public carrier VIA Rail restore passenger service this fall between Montreal and New Carlisle, or better yet, to Port-Daniel.

VIA Rail's service was suspended, not eliminated, between Montreal, Matapédia, and Gaspé in stages due to the condition of the track and, more importantly, the bridges. An initial reduction was imposed between New Carlisle and Gaspé in December 2011, then between Matapédia and New Carlisle in September 2013.

However, in March 2015, the Quebec Ministry of Transport acquired the Matapédia-Gaspé railway line before announcing its complete refurbishment in May 2017. Despite an investment of \$355 million in this refurbishment so far, its functional portion is limited to the Matapédia-New Richmond stretch, just over a third of the 325-kilometre distance between Matapédia and Gaspé.

However, this refurbishment is almost complete between New Richmond and Port-Daniel, approximately 80 additional kilometres. By the end of October, the work there will be completed, and perhaps even the inspections required before trains pass through. This reality prompted the Coalition of Gaspesians for the Return of Passenger Trains to call for



VIA Rail retirees Allan Dow, centre, and James Gough, right, attended the Port Daniel gathering to support the Coalition. Mr. Gough also attended the Carleton gathering earlier the same day.

Photo: G. Gagné

VIA Rail's return.

"Since 2013, the Coalition has worked tirelessly to bring this train back. What we de-

plore is that VIA Rail had committed to returning if the track was passable, (...) The rail line was in good condition for at

least 30 years. We ask VIA Rail to stop giving invalid excuses to avoid returning," says Coalition spokesperson Micheline Saint-Onge.

VIA Rail refuses to return in stages

One of the arguments used by VIA Rail's management over recent years to justify its refusal to reinstate the Gaspé train before the end of 2025 is the difficulty of returning in stages between Matapédia and Gaspé, because Gaspé represents its largest market on the peninsula.

"The train was suspended in stages. It can return in stages. It's an essential service. The railway will be reopened all the

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way to Gaspé, and we'll keep pushing until that's done, and as quickly as possible. Until then, we have to provide service wherever the train can pass," insists Ms. Saint-Onge.

Recently, at VIA Rail's annual public meeting, its president, Mario Péroquin, mentioned the difficulty of returning the train to a location that isn't equipped with a wye, such as Port-Daniel.

Alexis Deschênes, Member of Parliament for the riding of Gaspésie-Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine-Listuguj and an enthusiastic supporter of the Coalition, took advantage of the September 6 rallies to remind Mario Péroquin that it's not necessary to turn a train to make it go in the opposite direction.

"The Montreal-Halifax train returns to Montreal by placing its locomotives at the other end of the train," explains the Bloc Québécois Member of Parliament (MP).

"A train could therefore return from Port-Daniel to New Carlisle, where it can be turned," explains Gilles Lamy, a retired railway worker who spent nearly 40 years of his life



Inn owner Benoit Pilon, from Port-Daniel, assures that over the long term, tourism contributes to the demographic recovery of the Gaspé.

at CN and VIA Rail. He is one of the founders of the Coalition. "VIA Rail has been saving money at our expenses. The money for the Gaspé train is still included in VIA's budget, but we haven't received the service since 2013. At \$5 million annually, it amounts to \$60 million in 12 years. VIA owes it to Gaspésians, and must come back," explains Mr. Lamy.

A necessary public service in the Gaspé

Chandler mayor Gilles Daraïche points out that Gaspé-

sians have lost a lot in terms of interregional public transportation since 1990, when the VIA Rail train went from a daily service to three round trips per week between Montreal and Gaspé.

"We had this train, and we lost it. We almost lost the (Keolis) bus. We're already a remote region; we don't want to become an isolated region. We want the train for people who need services outside the region, for business people, for students. In Chandler, our CEGEP students have to go to Gaspé, Carleton, and Rimouski. Our university students go to Quebec City, Montreal, and Rimouski. The train offers many advantages," stresses Mr. Daraïche.

In the same breath, MP Alexis Deschênes denounces the arguments he hears from VIA Rail, such as that there aren't enough people in the Gaspé, that providing the service is too expensive, and that it's too complicated.

"When VIA Rail suspended service in 2013, the region's population was 94,000. It's now 92,300, and it's growing by 300 to 400 people a year. If the train were to return, it would be even easier to attract people," he says.



Photos: G. Gagné

Thanks to technology, Micheline Saint-Onge, spokesperson for the Coalition of Gaspésians for the Return of Passenger Trains, spoke from Port Daniel to Gaspé residents mobilized by the need to restore VIA Rail services.

Economically, Mr. Deschênes points out that public services like the Montreal metro and intercity buses in Longueuil, Montreal and Laval are all characterized by significant annual deficits. "All we're asking for is not a handout. It's a development tool."

Inn owner Benoit Pilon, from Port-Daniel, combines tourism and demographic factors when considering the train's usefulness. The VIA station is a stone's throw from his establishment. "Guests who came by train have bought houses here. They now live in Port-Daniel permanently."

Hope Town artist Enid Legros-Wise, who attended the New Carlisle gathering, with 65 other citizens, can't help but think of the usefulness of VIA Rail years ago, and the kindness of the staff.

"I was going to Montreal's Salon des métiers d'art with my porcelain pieces. I had so much luggage! I missed the train in New Carlisle. As I rushed to take it in Bonaventure, we saw

it going very slowly, almost stopped it seemed. The crew was waiting for me. I finally took it in Bonaventure!" she recalls.

A well-attended service

During its last decade of full service between Montreal and Gaspé, until 2011, the VIA Rail train carried between 25,000 and 30,000 passengers per year, more than the two Abitibi and Saguenay trains combined. Service is still maintained in these two regions.

The 400 citizens who expressed their support for the train's return on September 6 gathered in Matapédia, Carleton, New Richmond, Bonaventure, New Carlisle, Port-Daniel and Gaspé.

Including the amounts already invested, committed and to come, the Matapédia-Gaspé road rehabilitation project was estimated at \$872 million in June 2023.

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Many of the supporters for the return of the train came to the station with their suitcases, as seen here in Carleton, where the largest gathering took place, with 110 participants.