



VIA Rail explores “alternative return-to-service” scenarios in the Gaspé Peninsula

NELSON SERGERIE
LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE

GASPÉ – After more than ten years of stating that passenger rail services to Gaspé would only resume once the entire railway line was refurbished, VIA Rail is now exploring “alternative return-to-service” scenarios for the Chaleur train.

Bonaventure Member of the National Assembly (MNA) Catherine Blouin tabled a motion on May 27 in the National Assembly, calling for the return of passenger rail services to New Carlisle as soon as possible. The motion, which was unanimously supported by the elected officials present at the time of the vote, calls for the return of the passenger train to New Carlisle as soon as possible, noting that the rail line would be operational to Port-Daniel-Gascons in the coming weeks.

In addition, the motion called for the establishment of a shuttle between New Carlisle and Gaspé. The motion was brought to Ottawa on May 29 by Alexis Deschênes, the Member of Parliament for the riding of Gaspésie-Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine-Listuguj. However, the government remained very vague about its intentions.

In an email dated May 30, “VIA Rail has always affirmed its commitment to restoring service in the Gaspé when the tracks are safe and allow competitive travel times to Gaspé,” noted the public corporation. VIA stated that it had begun work to prepare for a possible return to service, in collaboration with the Quebec Ministry of Transport and Sustainable Mobility, and based on its timelines for track refurbishment to Gaspé by 2027.

“When the provincial budget was tabled on March 25, 2025, VIA Rail learned, at the same time as the Gaspé population, that the refurbishment work on the section between Port-Daniel-Gascons and Gaspé was postponed to the planning phase, with no new timeline to guide further efforts,” states VIA.

It was from this point on that the carrier's thinking seemed to have taken a new turn. “Faced with this major change, and still firmly committed to restoring rail service for Gaspé residents, VIA Rail must now return to the drawing board to explore alternative return-to-service scenarios,” ex-

plains the company's communications department, adding, however, that it is too early to comment on the form or parameters of these scenarios.

“(This is) music to my ears. This is a first for me to hear this type of comment,” says Ms. Blouin, who notes that she has been working on the file for a long time. She points out that collaboration between VIA Rail and Quebec is very good.

“To see it written in black and white that it was pushing them to return to the drawing board. There is no reason why the passenger train should not run to New Carlisle. It gives us hope,” adds Ms. Blouin, who also notes that this opportunity must be seized and serious negotiations should begin. “This is a good indication because until very recently, the position has always been that there would be no return until the rail service was operational all the way to Gaspé. There is an opening, and I welcome it. I intend to collaborate with VIA Rail if they need anything,” says Bloc Québécois MP Alexis Deschênes, who will continue to put pressure on the carrier.

“We're right to ask. Everyone is talking to us about the return of the train. It's an essential service that we want. So much the better if there's a change of tone from VIA Rail. It's the bare minimum we're asking for,” he adds.

A rumour is circulating at the provincial level that the carrier is toying with the idea of separating the Ocean train and the Chaleur train, which would run independently between Montreal and Matapédia.

VIA, however, did not mention such a scenario in its email. The Coalition of Gaspésians for the Return of the VIA Rail Train believes that studying alternative scenarios for the Gaspé will put pressure on Quebec to refurbish the rail line to Gaspé.

“The more people take the train, the more pressure there will be on the government to complete the section. It's important that VIA Rail return to explain these alternative solutions,” says coalition spokesperson Micheline Saint-Onge.

The coalition is ready to work with VIA Rail on the next steps, relaying the messages received from meetings held in recent months between Mata-

pedia and Port-Daniel-Gascons and those to come in Rocher-Percé and the Côte-de-Gaspé.

Is the motion the key?

Everything seems to be moving forward since the motion by the MNA for Bonaventure, who indicated that regional connections were at the heart of VIA Rail's mandate.

“The Matapédia-Gaspé regional connection is essential to serving the communities of the Gaspé. That the National Assembly request Via Rail to restore at least rail service to New Carlisle as soon as possible and to implement a shuttle to provide a connection to Gaspé,” states the motion read by the elected official.

The Coalition of Gaspésians for the Return of the Passenger Train is pleased with this stance taken by elected officials in Quebec City, as the group has been struggling since January to secure such progress.

“In April, we sent a specific letter to the two provincial MNAs, Ms. Blouin and Mr. (Stéphane) Sainte-Croix, and



Photo: N. Sergerie

Bonaventure MNA Catherine Blouin tabled a motion calling for VIA Rail to return to the Gaspé Peninsula.

to the Minister of Transport, Geneviève Guilbault, asking them to take a position and take action and request a motion to support the project,” says Coalition spokesperson Micheline Saint-Onge.

A meeting with the MNA Blouin, her Gaspé riding col-

league Stéphane Sainte-Croix and a representative from the Ministry of Transport was held on May 15.

“We are extremely pleased that this has produced results that have been expected since 2013,” added Ms. Saint-Onge. “We are now waiting for the next steps. June, July 2025 is not far off. We're continuing the process to get the train back this summer,” she explained before VIA's letter.

A major factor holding VIA back from its return is the lack of rolling stock, in addition to stations, track safety, and staff. “What we learned from the meeting on May 15 is that there's a committee in place with VIA and the Ministry of Transport. I don't know where VIA is at,” notes Ms. Saint-Onge.

“The only problem VIA had was with rolling stock. But a lot of pressure was taken off that file because new cars were delivered to the Quebec City-Windsor corridor. The ones that were removed need repairs, but that frees up 160 cars. I can't believe there wouldn't be a few cars that could come to the Gaspé,” she suggests.