



VIA Rail's return to Gaspésie: A mobilized, but impatient population

GILLES GAGNÉ

MATAPEDIA – The Gaspé Peninsula population remains mobilized to demand the return of passenger train service by the public carrier VIA Rail. However, impatience is growing among some citizens, who wonder whether the solution might involve engaging a transporter other than the federal corporation.

About forty citizens from all walks of life gathered on the morning of October 11 to attend a meeting with federal, provincial, and municipal politicians. Everyone is once again calling for the phased return of VIA Rail's train, first between Matapédia and Port-Daniel, where the track has now been repaired, and later to Gaspé.

In the audience, a citizen asked Alexis Deschênes, Member of Parliament (MP) for Gaspésie-les-Îles-de-la-Madeleine-Listuguj, if an alternative model to VIA Rail could be considered. Mr. Deschênes responded affirmatively, although he will continue to request that the public corporation fulfill its general mandate, which includes serving the Gaspé Peninsula.

"VIA Rail cannot say that the Gaspé Peninsula railway is unsafe; a sum of approximately \$350 million has been invested in it between Matapédia and Port-Daniel-Gascons (...) But we could say to VIA Rail: 'If you don't come back, we'll withdraw your funding and entrust it to a company that is interested in providing the service.' Discussions are underway to develop a Plan B," Alexis Deschênes indicated, without providing further details at this time.

VIA Rail service between Matapédia and other Gaspé Peninsula stations has been suspended since the summer of 2013 due to the poor condition of the network, particularly its many bridges. However, approximately 62% of the network is now operational, from



Photo: G. Gagné

Federal, Provincial, and municipal elected officials, along with regional socio-economic leaders, reaffirmed on October 11 their desire to compel VIA Rail to return to the Gaspé Peninsula, or to consider a Plan B, with a budget transfer.

Matapédia to Port-Daniel, or will be in November. Final inspections remain to be carried out on a few bridges that have been repaired or rebuilt since 2017.

However, for the past five years, VIA Rail management has insisted that the region's passenger train will only return east of Matapédia once the network's rehabilitation is completed as far as Gaspé. This management had, however, expressed openness to a phased return in 2016 and again in 2019.

Minister of Transport asked to move

On October 8, Alexis Deschênes had a lengthy meeting with the new federal Minister of Transport, Steven MacKinnon, to explain why VIA Rail can, and must return services between Matapédia and Port-Daniel immediately, then in stages, to Gaspé.

In 2011, the public carrier suspended its service in stages, first between Gaspé and New Carlisle, then between New Carlisle and Matapédia in 2013.

"There is no valid reason to delay the return of the train. VIA Rail receives \$1.3 billion per year in public funding, in-

cluding \$400 million to cover its annual operational deficit," Mr. Deschênes stated.

He was able to confirm on

October 11 that his meeting with Minister MacKinnon did not produce any immediate results. In the House of Com-

mons the day before, he had questioned the Carney government about pressuring VIA Rail to respect its mandate, and the Gaspé MP was able to see that the government had not reached that stage. "Mr. MacKinnon was out of the country. He wasn't the one who answered me," Mr. Deschênes explained.

For five years, VIA Rail management, in addition to the "once repaired to Gaspé argument," has cited all sorts of barriers to justify postponing its return, including the condition of the stations, the need to operate at a reasonable and safe speed, staff recruitment, and the lack of rolling stock.

The Coalition for the Return of Passenger Train Services in the Gaspé, which until recently included "VIA Rail" in its name, is working hard to

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demonstrate that the carrier's concerns no longer hold water.

"Last year, there were more than 20,000 trips by people living between Gaspé and Matapédia, who had to travel far from their homes to receive care and services that are only available in major cities. This clientele was taking the train before the service was discontinued," explains Micheline Saint-Onge, spokesperson for the Coalition.

She also rejects VIA Rail's argument that there is not enough equipment to organize a passenger train to meet the needs of Gaspé Peninsula residents.

"VIA cars are currently serving Gaspé Peninsula residents and visitors, even though it is no easy task to get to the stations served by the trains in Campbellton and Matapédia." According to information received from VIA Rail's access to information service, in 2024, there were at least 2,643 train trips made solely by people residing along the entire south coast of the Gaspé Peninsula and who are VIA Preference program customers.

"So, why is it so complicated for these cars and locomotives to continue from Matapédia to Port-Daniel?" she asks.

Considering that only 21% of VIA Rail users are members of the VIA Prefer-

ence program, it is reasonable to suggest that 12,000 to 13,000 Gaspé residents take the train in Campbellton or Matapédia, after having traveled considerable distances by car, notes Ms. Saint-Onge.

"These people have a seat on the train, and these seats could branch off in Matapédia to Port-Daniel-Gascons," adds Alexis Deschênes.

Additional support from the Bloc Québécois

On October 10-11, Mr. Deschênes received support from Bloc Québécois colleagues, Member of Parliament Xavier Barsalou-Duval, his party's Transport critic, and Maxime Blanchette-Joncas, MP for Rimouski-La Matapédia, the riding next to Mr. Deschênes's. All three took the train to Matapédia, the latter two from Ottawa.

"It's by being tireless that we end up being indispensable and that (winning the fight) ends up happening," summarized Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

"We don't wait for Ottawa to remember us; we remind them that we exist (...) We tell them: get the train back on track," added Mr. Blanchette-Joncas.

Éric Dubé, president of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie, assures that in November, the New Richmond-Port-Daniel portion of the network owned by the Quebec Ministry of Transport will be ready to handle both freight and passenger

trains.

"I can confirm that the rail line has been rehabilitated to meet both needs," he insisted.

The Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie is a municipally controlled entity that handles freight transportation, currently between Matapédia and New Richmond, as well as maintenance of the railway line owned by Transports Québec. The ministry has owned the line since the spring of 2015.

In March, Transports Québec suspended the publication of new calls for tenders for the continued rehabilitation of the network between Port-Daniel-Gascons and Gaspé, although most of the contracts awarded in 2024 for this route are currently underway.

When asked about her government's intentions regarding the completion of the work up to Gaspé, the CAQ Member of the National Assembly for Bonaventure, Catherine Blouin, had no an-



Photo: Gilles Gagné

Member of Parliament Alexis Deschênes affirms that VIA Rail no longer has any reason to postpone its return to the Gaspé Peninsula.

nouncements to make.

"We had set aside a budget of \$500 million (for Port-Daniel to Gaspé), and there were cost overruns of \$200 million: we had to rethink how to optimize the work," she replied.

She added that her government is examining several scenarios for continuing calls for tenders and the work, including splitting certain contracts so that regional

companies could carry them out, perhaps more quickly and at a lower cost than outside consortia.

In 2023 and 2024, Transports Québec adopted an opposite strategy, hoping to achieve economies of scale by grouping calls for tenders.

In June 2023, Transports Québec estimated the total refurbishment cost of the Matapédia-Gaspé corridor at \$872 million.