

VIA meets with stakeholders in the Gaspé Peninsula

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GASPÉ - Although absolute discretion had been requested, VIA Rail's Director of Government and Indigenous Relations, Denis Boucher, visited the Gaspé Peninsula during the week of July 7 to discuss the possible resumption of service in the Gaspé Peninsula with various stakeholders.

According to what we have learned, Mr. Boucher is also visiting sites to assess their condition in preparation for a return of service, which VIA confirmed on July 11. (See other article)

All of the stakeholders with whom SPEC spoke remain cautious in their comments so as not to reveal too much about the substance of their discussions with Mr. Boucher.

"Mr. Boucher asked to meet with me, and it was the first meeting where we each presented our views," explains Alexis Deschênes, Member of Parliament (MP) for Gaspésie-Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine.

The two-hour meeting was described as frank and direct. "As for the specific content of the discussions, Mr. Boucher asked that it remain confidential," adds the MP.

"My position remains unchanged. What I want is for



Photo: N. Sergerie

"No tracks, no train," says Daniel Côté.

VIA Rail to return to the Gaspé Peninsula as soon as possible, and I want to help make that happen as quickly as possible," continues the elected official.

VIA Rail had intended to resume service to the Gaspé Peninsula, including Gaspé, in 2027. However, the Quebec government's decision in March to revisit the work to be done on section three (Port Daniel-Gaspé) changed the situation.

"We wanted to use this visit by a VIA Rail representative to ensure that we have good channels of communica-

tion. It allowed me to reiterate our goal as a railway company to continue working to convince the Quebec government to provide the necessary funds for the rehabilitation of the track to Gaspé," says Éric Dubé, president of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie.

VIA's issues were discussed during the exchange. "We reiterated that if VIA Rail needed us to restore passenger service, we would be there," continued Mr. Dubé, who pointed out that the company's objective is not to make a profit, but to provide service.

However, no commitment was made.

"We understand that Mr. Boucher was not there to confirm or deny anything. That is VIA Rail's private domain. It was really to discuss objectives and understand the real issues. But for us, the goal is to bring passenger service back to Gaspé as quickly as possible," Mr. Dubé reiterated.

The Coalition for the Return of VIA Rail Passenger Service to the Gaspé Peninsula is satisfied with the meeting, which helped rebuild bridges after a year of silence.

"The goal was to inform each other about our respective activities on the train issue and establish a channel of communication. For a year,

we hadn't really received any feedback on our letters," explains coalition spokesperson Micheline Saint-Onge.

VIA mentioned that it had been working with the Quebec government on bringing back the train for two years.

"But last March's decision to return to the analysis phase delayed the completion of the work to Gaspé. They were working on the return with the Ministry of Transportation, but the decision took them by surprise, forcing them to review the planning for the return to the Gaspé Peninsula," says Ms. Saint-Onge.

"We reiterated the needs of the Gaspé population, but this train is also for all of Quebec and Canada. We reaffirmed that we would continue our efforts and ask VIA and Quebec City for the gradual return of the train as soon as the tracks are ready to Port-Daniel-Gaspé," adds the coalition spokesperson.

"We continue to tell the MTQ (Ministry of Transport of Quebec) and VIA to keep in mind that we are asking for a return to Gaspé as soon as possible," concludes Ms. Saint-Onge, who points out that the coalition still needs the support of the population to pursue its demands.

The VIA representative ended his tour by meeting with Daniel Côté the mayor of

Gaspé on July 10. He is equally discreet about the discussions he had with Mr. Boucher, as the meeting was held behind closed doors.

"What we can say is that VIA Rail still intends to serve the Gaspé Peninsula all the way to Gaspé. That's clear to them. It's what I've been saying for some time: no tracks, no trains," said the mayor.

The push to restore rail service to Gaspé is back in the Quebec government's hands.

"I understand that not everyone is on the same page as me, and there are attempts to divide Bay of Chaleur from the tip of the Gaspé Peninsula, but the goal remains to repair the rail line to Gaspé. If VIA Rail decides to serve part of the Gaspé Peninsula, they will be able to do so. Currently, that is not their main focus," argues Mr. Côté.

"We have no foreseeable horizon from Quebec (the government). VIA Rail is putting itself on hold and continues to hope to have a track to run their train, just as we hope they will come back," says the mayor.

"It's a false debate to argue about VIA Rail when we're losing focus on the essential issue, which is getting the track back. VIA Rail pretty much agrees with our position on this. No track, no train," concludes Mr. Côté.