



Gaspé Railway: doubts sown by Jonatan Julien displease rail transport advocates

GILLES GAGNÉ

NEW RICHMOND – Doubts raised on February 25 by Quebec Transport minister Jonatan Julien regarding the feasibility of pursuing the complete overhaul of the Gaspé railway have ruffled feathers, to varying degrees, among the main advocates of this project, which has been plagued by numerous delays over the past 10 years.

In response to a question from Liberal Member of the National Assembly (MNA) Enrico Ciccone, his party's spokesperson for Gaspé Peninsula issues, asking what the MNA for Gaspé, Stéphane Sainte-Croix, thought of the unfulfilled promises, minister Julien answered on his behalf. Mr. Julien mentioned that "the last section," specifically the Port-Daniel-Gaspé line, whose refurbishment remains to be completed, "had a business plan closely linked to LM Power (sic), with the wind turbines. Once this structure (passes) through maritime transport, we will reconsider the third section."

It is reasonable to assume that Jonatan Julien meant that the wind-turbine blade manufacturer LM Wind Power, based in Gaspé, now exports its production by ship to the United States. Theoretically, this could reduce potential rail traffic between Gaspé and the rest of North America.

However, this is not the case, notes regional development consultant Gaétan Lelièvre, who was astonished by minister Julien's remarks and his lack of familiarity with the Gaspé rail file.

"I think minister Julien hasn't familiarized himself with the files since he arrived at the Ministry of Transport. The LM plant no longer manufactures 107-metre blades, which were too large to be transported on railway cars. The plant has shifted its focus to blades under 75 metres, which can be transported by rail," explains Mr. Lelièvre.

Gaétan Lelièvre, former Member of the National Assembly for Gaspé from 2012 to 2018 and minister of Regional Development from 2012 to 2014, finds it troubling that Jonatan Julien, who was minister responsible for the Gaspé Peninsula in 2021, is "either acting in bad faith or is simply uninformed about this issue," he says.



Photo: G. Gagné

From December 2016 to May 2022, blade trains operated in the Gaspé Peninsula.

"The question posed in the National Assembly wasn't about a secondary road project. The railway is crucial in the Gaspé Peninsula, and it deserves special attention, especially considering that minister Julien recently (in December) visited the Gaspé Peninsula to meet with stakeholders concerned about the railway," adds Mr. Lelièvre.

"We're talking about freight trains, but any delay also affects passenger transport, given the situation with VIA Rail, which doesn't want to return to the Gaspé Peninsula until the railway is repaired all the way to Gaspé. That, too, is crucial," he emphasizes.

The delays

In April 2019, Premier François Legault indicated that the complete refurbishment of the Gaspé railway would be completed in seven years, by 2026. Faced with criticism over the long delay, Mr. Legault moved the deadline forward to 2025 in August 2019.

While the Matapedia-New Richmond section has remained operational despite undergoing refurbishment work, the New Richmond-Port-Daniel line has been hampered by half a dozen reopening delays. These postponements were staggered from 2020 to December 2025.

In June 2023, Geneviève Guilbaut, then Minister of Transport, came to Gaspé to announce that the total cost of

refurbishing the 325 kilometres of track between Matapédia and Gaspé would amount to \$871.8 million, including \$517 million for the 132 kilometres between Port-Daniel and Gaspé. She reiterated the target date of 2026 for its reopening.

However, in the March 2025 budget, the Legault government removed the refurbishment of the Port-Daniel-Gaspé line section from the Quebec Infrastructure Program (PQI), returning it to the "study" stage, specifically the business plan.

The government justified this decision by citing calls for tenders for this line that exceeded the preliminary estimates of the Ministry of Transport, the railway's owner, by approximately \$150 million.

Although not related, this sum of \$150 million also corresponds to the amount already invested between Port-Daniel and Gaspé since 2020 to repair major bridges and improve the railway bed.

Costly delays

Gaétan Lelièvre asserts that these numerous delays, often attributed to the pandemic or the need to reassess the business plan, are costing the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie (SCFG) dearly in lost transportation opportunities, not to mention the inflation attributable to construction projects. The SCFG is a municipally con-

trolled entity that provides freight transportation.

"By not offering LM Wind Power rail access from Gaspé, we are reducing its competitiveness in a global market, even though it is the only blade manufacturing plant in Canada. Blades were transported to reach the railway in New Richmond (between 2016 and 2022), but the land-based portion was very expensive. The minister knows, or should know, that there is a project to reopen the Murdochville copper mine. The developer, Osisko, could make other arrangements if the railway is not ready when it opens. And that doesn't even take into account other unknown transportation projects. It also doesn't take into account that \$150 million has already been invested between Port-Daniel and Gaspé," explains the former Member of the National Assembly.

He suggests that Premier François Legault, or whoever replaces him after the Coalition Avenir Québec leadership race, should bring minister Julien to heel.

"He should do his job properly, or the premier should replace him. He's not very diligent and he makes cavalier statements. It's unacceptable to hear that (what he said to Enrico Ciccone). It's already difficult for the region to move our files forward when there's good faith on the part of the government. Imagine when a minister is poorly informed, even if he came to the Gaspé Peninsula to learn about the railway. It's zero tolerance," Mr. Lelièvre states firmly.

He fears that Jonatan Julien's comments are setting the stage for bad news in the next Quebec government budget. At press time, the Quebec budget had not been announced yet.

"We're wasting time and losing momentum. The gov-

ernment is preparing its budget. The Quebec Infrastructure Plan (PQI) is being developed for the coming years. Will we see a second year of delays on a project announced with great fanfare in 2023? I fear we're heading for a second year without calls for tenders. Meanwhile, costs are rising, and gloom is setting in. People will organize themselves in ways other than around the railway, with the risk of losing businesses and transportation opportunities," laments Gaétan Lelièvre.

The president of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie (SCFG), Éric Dubé, cautiously admits to having been surprised by Jonatan Julien's comments on February 25.

"The potential of LM Wind Power and the return to blades that can be transported by rail were explained. Furthermore, it's not about 'draining' the region of its production. There are many inputs that can reach the Gaspé Peninsula by rail, for the wind energy sector, for the Port-Daniel cement plant, and for other businesses," Mr. Dubé points out.

"The issue remains political," notes the president of the SCFG, thinking of the election campaign scheduled to begin this summer.

Gaétan Lelièvre regrets that the railway is likely to become, once again, part of an election campaign.

"This could have been resolved before the election campaign. I can't help but think about the boomerang effect that Jonatan Julien's comments could have on the MNAs for Bonaventure and Gaspé, Catherine Blouin and Stéphane Sainte-Croix, who have been advocating for the railway's restoration since entering politics. They are also from the same party as the minister," Mr. Lelièvre concludes.