

Passenger train to return by spring 2028 at the latest

GILLES GAGNÉ

NEW CARLISLE – The Coalition of Gaspesians for the return of a passenger train reports that VIA Rail will return between Matapedia and New Carlisle during the spring of 2028 at the latest, a timeline that the coalition's coordinator, Micheline Saint-Onge, considers too far away.

The spring of 2028 was referred to by VIA Rail representatives Denis Boucher, director of government affairs, and Florence Lefrançois, special projects advisor for the federal transporter. They met virtually with Micheline Saint-Onge, several members of the Coalition and various stakeholders on August 4.

"The spring of 2028 is the slowest scenario. We think it is very late and it can go faster," first comments Ms. Saint-Onge, who adds that, overall, the meeting went well. It followed a first meet-



Photo: Gilles Gagné

VIA Rail says passenger service between Matapedia and New Carlisle could return by the spring of 2028 at the latest, although the Coalition of Gaspesians for the return of a passenger train believes service could resume sooner.

ing on May 6, at the end of which VIA Rail agreed to return around mid-summer to submit a preliminary work plan.

Based on the May talks, VIA Rail favours a day train between Quebec City and the Gaspé Peninsula.

"The VIA people showed the same openness as in May. For example, in May, they were saying that it would take three years to train staff. Now, they say that it wouldn't take three years but six months," explains Micheline Saint-Onge.

She adds that it was agreed on in May that the mid-summer meeting would not be a decisive one.

"We mainly agreed on a return in October. They are very open to the exchange of information," she points out.

The biggest hurdle expressed by VIA Rail is the necessary right of way agreement that must be reached with railroad owners in order to reach the return of the passenger train. Those two owners are Transports Québec, between Matapedia and Gaspé, and Canadian National (CN), between Quebec City and Matapedia.

"They think it will be long. With the Quebec government, nothing will be decided before a new cabinet meeting, which means no talks before at least two-and-a-half months, since we are near the beginning of an electoral campaign. That campaign will also be important in determining the progress

of the line upgrading between Port Daniel and Gaspé," explains Ms. Saint-Onge.

The status of talks with CN is unknown, as the freight transporter is not renowned for making things easy for passenger trains.

Micheline Saint-Onge appreciates the collaboration of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie (SCFG) in the current context. The SCFG operates freight trains between Matapedia and Port Daniel.

"Its president, Mr. (Éric) Dubé is expressing full readiness to collaborate, as he would be ready to make locomotive engineers available to VIA Rail, although there might be a union problem in that regard," she stresses.

VIA Rail's service in the Gaspé Peninsula has been suspended since 2013, with the exception of the stops in Matapedia for the Montreal-Halifax train.