

The Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie will build a transshipment centre in Port-Daniel

GILLES GAGNÉ

PORT DANIEL – The Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie will soon build a freight transshipment centre near the Port-Daniel cement plant. The goal is to increase service to the plant and also to provide a service to shippers awaiting the rehabilitation of the rail network between Port-Daniel and Gaspé.

This rehabilitation is being carried out using contracts already completed or underway, but the Quebec Ministry of Transport suspended the awarding of new repair contracts between Port-Daniel and Gaspé a year ago after certain tenders were deemed too expensive. For the second year in a row, the Quebec Infrastructure Plan, as outlined in the March 18 budget, does not include new funding for that portion of the regional rail network.

Luc Lévesque, director general of the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie (SCFG), the freight carrier between Matapédia and Port Daniel, specifies that a 22-



Photo: Anthony Bernard Prince

The railway line was reopened from New Richmond to Port Daniel on January 7 and cement traffic started on January 19.

hectare piece of land has been acquired near the cement plant, which has been a rail customer from that location since January. It was during that month that the railway line between New Richmond and Port-Daniel was reopened, after several delays announced by Transports Québec, the railway's owner.

"The purchase price is \$300,000. We anticipate that once the tracks and access road are installed, the investment could exceed \$1 million.

This will be allocated according to the needs of the coming months and years," explains Mr. Lévesque.

"For the moment, nothing is attached, but it's our neighbour, Saint Mary's Cement. We already transport cement for them. We think there might be a need for raw materials arriving at the cement plant. We're in discussions. We had to make a move. It's one of the only places where we could set up a transshipment centre near the cement plant. The

zoning change was made by the previous owner," he adds.

Recently, the Minister of Transport, Jonatan Julien, indicated that he was waiting for a "business plan" from the Gaspé Railway Corporation to justify the railway's rehabilitation to Gaspé.

He was sharply criticized by regional development consultant Gaétan Lelièvre, who reminded him that Quebec's Ministry of Transport had failed to fulfill its commitment to repair the rail network to Gaspé by 2025 or 2026, as promised by premier François Legault starting in 2019 and several times since. Mr. Lelièvre denounced the fact that the minister was trying to shift the burden of this commitment onto the people of Gaspé.

Getting closer to Gaspé, and eventually servicing it

Luc Lévesque is reluctant to engage in political debates, but he clarified that the Port-Daniel transshipment centre aims, in particular, to attract companies that want to reduce

their transportation costs while awaiting the real solution: the reopening of the railway between Port-Daniel and Gaspé. These companies include LM Wind Power, a manufacturer of wind turbine blades.

"We are in discussions with clients. We have received requests for information. Regarding the transport of the blades, the dimensions are compatible with rail transport. The client will decide on the best method. The door is not closed, far from it," says Mr. Lévesque.

The SCFG transported blades for five and a half years, from December 2016 to May 2022, between New Richmond and Matapédia, where CN took delivery for their final destination, Texas or neighbouring states. The transport of the blades between the LM plant in Gaspé and New Richmond was done by truck, at great expense to the American wind farm developers.

"In 2016, I didn't know

Cont'd on page 10

three months before the blade shipment that we would have this contract. The fire keeps burning. We can't wait for the contract to come in before organizing. Once the agreement is signed, we can finalize the arrangements in Port-Daniel within two months. If we had to buy land and rezone it, it would take at least a year. The idea is to be ready in a matter of weeks, based on a client's expressed need, and that includes transporting blades. In New Richmond, we had very little space. Now, we have plenty," explains Luc Lévesque.

A transshipment centre for blades in Port-Daniel is not the ultimate goal, however.

"The objective is to load them in Gaspé. That's where we can offer the best trans-

portation costs to our clients," insists Mr. Lévesque.

Daniel Côté wonders how ministers get their information

Frustrated by what he sees as shifting political narratives around a commitment made by Premier François Legault seven years ago, Gaspé Mayor Daniel Côté is questioning how Quebec's transport ministers and other cabinet members are being informed about the Gaspé railway file.

"I don't understand how they can believe that LM is supplying offshore wind farms with 107-metre blades, when that hasn't been the case since the end of 2023! I have the impression that the system (the civil servants) is negatively influencing the politicians. I had a conversation with Geneviève Guilbault, whom I know relatively well,



Photo: Gilles Gagné

Gaspé Mayor Daniel Côté questions how Quebec ministers are informed about the potential of the Gaspé railway.

when she was Minister of Transport, and I got the impression that she had been brainwashed by her system,"

says Mr. Côté.

"Minister Julien indicated that LM is now shipping its blades by ship. It's clear they're using ships. There's no train (in Gaspé)! Are they going to store blades until 2075? Osisko is coming to re-open the Murdochville mine in 2032. Robert Wares (president of Osisko) announced in the media that he will need the rail; 2032 is six years away. The work should start immediately, at the current pace, so that everything is ready. They want a business plan. We're going to make one. We're going to demonstrate it again," the mayor of Gaspé reiterates.

He notes that the delays are increasing the repair costs, already impacted by the numerous delays that have occurred since 2019.

"Nine of the 15 structures located between Port-Daniel and Gaspé are currently under

construction. How can we justify repairing nine of the 15 structures on a railway that won't be used? Does it cost money? Yes, but why so much? Because (the Transport ministry) is stumbling! The longer it takes, the more development opportunities we lose, the more economic competitiveness we lose, and the more it will cost," concludes Daniel Côté.

When Geneviève Guilbault announced that the railroad refurbishment bill would cost \$871.8 million for the whole Matapedia-Gaspé stretch on June 27, 2023, the transport of turbine blades was no longer part of the picture, since at that time, LM was only exporting 107-metre blades for offshore wind farms.

The railway rehabilitation project officially began in 2017, with an initial budget of \$100 million.