



VIA Rail commits to a partial and gradual return to the Gaspé Peninsula

GILLES GAGNÉ

NELSON SERGERIE

GASPÉ – For the first time in close to a decade, VIA Rail has committed to a partial return to the Gaspé Peninsula following the rehabilitation of the rail line between Matapédia and Port-Daniel-Gascons. However, several steps must be completed before the first train can run.

The interim president and chief executive officer of the public passenger rail carrier made the statement on March 11 while appearing before the Standing Committee on Transportation in Ottawa.

“We need to secure the use of the tracks with the Quebec government, the use of the stations, the platforms. We would like to have agreements with regional bus companies for passengers who wish to continue their journey to Percé and Gaspé,” comments Mathieu Paquette, who was being questioned by the Coalition for the Return of Passenger Train Service in the Gaspé Peninsula and the Bloc Québécois Member of Parliament (MP) for Gaspé–Les-Îles-de-la-Madeleine–Listuguj, Alexis Deschênes.

Mr. Paquette is expected to visit the Gaspé Peninsula soon to meet with regional stakeholders to discuss the challenges related to a partial return.

Among the options being considered is a daily train service between the Gaspé Peninsula and Quebec City, operating during the daytime.

Reactions

“I am extremely pleased,” states the Coalition spokesperson, Micheline Saint-Onge, who obtained a commitment from VIA Rail to work with her group on the next steps.

“I really felt that with the dozen or so VIA Rail people on site, everyone was friendly and eager for the project to move forward. It feels good,” she says about the hearing of the Standing Committee on

Transportation.

“I’m very happy because we’ve achieved a major victory. For several years now, VIA Rail has been telling us that they won’t return to the Gaspé Peninsula until the rail line is repaired all the way to Gaspé,” comments Member of Parliament Alexis Deschênes, who, when he was a Legal Aid lawyer in 2022, had formally notified VIA Rail to remind its obligation to provide service as the rail line was rehabilitated.

“Together, we managed to get VIA Rail to back down. We’re no longer in confrontation but in collaboration. Mr. Paquette seems sincere in his desire to return,” the MP maintains.

The public corporation already has rolling stock to resume service. The train stops will need to be determined, staff will need to be found to operate a train, and the route will need to be designated, whether VIA Rail decides to stop its train in New Carlisle or Port Daniel.

A rail line to complete

VIA Rail’s return could force the Quebec government to finally commit clearly to refurbishing the railway line to Gaspé, as candidates in the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) leadership race are demanding a business plan before investing in the Port Daniel-Gascons-Gaspé section.

“This demonstrates the importance of completing the rail refurbishment to Gaspé. Seriously, I don’t think any politician can say that \$200 million has been invested between Port-Daniel-Gascons and Gaspé, but that we’re going to leave it as is and leave new bridges that won’t be connected. It’s impossible that this is the end of the story,” says Alexis Deschênes.

He added that he is prepared to submit a request for federal assistance, provided the Quebec government makes the request.



Photo: Photo supplied by Alexis Deschênes’ office

Micheline Saint-Onge following her appearance before the Standing Committee on Transportation at the Parliament of Ottawa on March 11. She is flanked by VIA Rail president Mathieu Paquette and by Member of Parliament Alexis Deschênes.

“We will certainly ask people each time to get involved in the rail repairs all the way to Gaspé. This fall, we will be working with all the candidates from all the parties. We won’t give up,” Ms. Saint-Onge states.

VIA suspended its service on August 13, 2013. At the time, the use of a salted solution as a defoliant by the Société du chemin de fer de la Gaspésie was cited as the reason for the suspension. However, VIA Rail later pointed to the deteriorated condition of the bridges and track between Matapédia and New Carlisle to justify maintaining the shutdown.

Micheline Saint-Onge’s testimony

The Standing Committee on Transportation was holding hearings pertaining to the reliability of VIA Rail’s rolling equipment, or reliability’s shortcomings, and service improvements. Micheline Saint-Onge was offered five minutes to testify on the second point, and the necessity to bring back a passenger train service in the Gaspé Peninsula, east of Matapédia. She made the most of the time she was entitled.

She noted that VIA Rail transported 80,500 passengers annually in 1984-1985, which did not prevent the public carrier from closing several stations during the same period,

including the Maria station, home to the only hospital in the Baie-des-Chaleurs region.

The reduction in train frequency in 1990, from seven to three round trips per week between Montreal and Gaspé, brought the number of passengers down to 42,000 per year for a short while, Ms. Saint-Onge also pointed out. Between 2004 and 2011, the year service was suspended between New Carlisle and Gaspé, ridership ranged between 24,000 and 30,000 passengers.

“VIA Rail had higher requirements (in Gaspé) than anywhere else in Canada,” Micheline Saint-Onge pointed out in response to the reasons given by the carrier for suspending its service at the end of the summer of 2013.

In 2013, the train stopped in Matapédia, Carleton, New Richmond, Bonaventure, and New Carlisle, with an optional stop in Caplan despite the lack of a station at the time.

In response to questions from Mr. Deschênes, Mr. Paquette said that choosing New Carlisle instead of Port-Daniel as a temporary terminus would be practical because of the presence of a wye, a Y-shaped turnaround point.

When the MP suggested Port-Daniel could serve as the terminus for the first phase, given that freight service resumed there on January 7, Mr. Paquette replied, “We’re look-

ing at everything.”

The MP also asked him what VIA Rail planned to do to reassure the people of the Gaspé Peninsula about its true intentions to return. Mathieu Paquette indicated: “We hear the people of the Gaspé Peninsula. We often say at VIA Rail that it was one of the most beautiful routes (...) We will do it in an efficient and safe way.”

The battle of a region

Following the hearings, Mr. Deschênes also paid tribute to the people of the Gaspé Peninsula, who signed several petitions and held demonstrations over the years to regain a passenger train service.

“During the last election campaign, I told the people of the Gaspé that resignation was not an option and that we had to unite to loudly and clearly demand the services to which they are entitled. VIA Rail has a duty to ensure regional rail service and will receive \$2.3 billion in public funding this year, specifically to fulfill this mandate. Our pressure has paid off. Of course, we must remain vigilant to ensure that these encouraging words translate into concrete actions and the return of passenger rail service as soon as possible. But today, all the people of the Gaspé can still be proud of having made VIA Rail back down,” he wrote in a press release.