

Abandoned tracks: Competition for Beebe line

By Scott Verity Stevenson

SHERBROOKE — As the Canadian Pacific railway tracks continue to rust between Lennoxville and Beebe, lobby groups are getting their wheels rolling on solutions for the officially abandoned right-of-way and land.

The provincial government seems ready to pass up its option on the former Beebe Subdivision land, but the special interest groups are vying for public support.

Nostalgie de la Vapeur, a group wanting to run an old-fashioned steam train on the CP tracks, has already received "support in principle" from a number of municipalities along the route. Claiming about 100 members, the Nostalgie crowd have been negotiating with Canadian National for locomotives and with Canadian Pacific for the

actual railbed.

LANDOWNERS

Property owners along the eastern shore of Lake Massawippi are putting in calls to Marathon Realty, the CP real estate arm in charge of selling the 46 kilometre right-of-way.

Meanwhile the organization *Sentier Massawippi* wants the Sherbrooke-Beebe track converted to a multi-purpose trail excluding motorized vehicles.

According to Tom Vandermeulen and Keith Baxter of the newly-formed *Sentier Massawippi* co-ordinating committee, about 500 cyclists, hikers and horseback riders have already joined up and about four thousand more area residents have signed a petition in favor of their proposal.

The new trail group has joined forces with *Estrie à Cheval*, the re-

gional association of horseback riders, which has been lobbying for riding trails throughout the Townships since 1986.

Cheval president Jacques Robidas is also on the co-ordinating committee of *Sentier Massawippi*.

"We consider them to be a supportive organization," says Baxter. "The more trails that connect, the better for everyone."

LENNOXVILLE

The Recreational Track Committee of Lennoxville has already obtained the town's go-ahead for a trail along the St. Francis River from Depot Street in Lennoxville north to the Sherbrooke city limit, and would like to extend the trail south as well.

Declaring themselves "all in favor" of the trail concept, Lennoxville town council has set aside \$25,000 toward the cost.

Lennoxville town manager Jacques Gagnon says he hopes other rail-to-trail interest groups will get together.

Responding to the notion of a recreational trail, Jean-Paul Véronneau of *Nostalgie de la Vapeur* said it would be open to abuse by drivers of motorcycles, all terrain vehicles and snowmobiles, and theft and vandalism would follow.

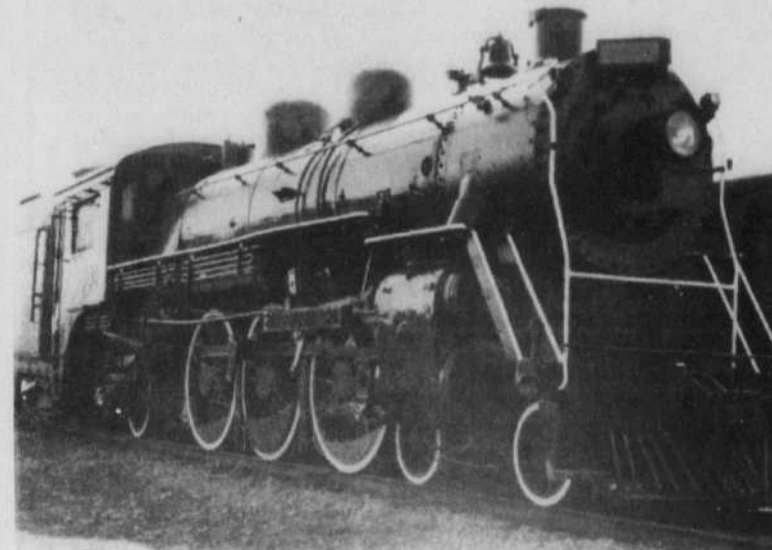
'NOBODY GETS OFF'

"Our train goes once on the track and nobody gets off. This way you're not getting everybody in your backyard," Véronneau said.

Véronneau echoes opposition to the recreational trail proposal from some property owners along Lake Massawippi who are worried about theft, vandalism, and a lack of privacy resulting from public use of the right-of-way.



Strollers already often use the abandoned Lennoxville to Beebe railbed as an informal hiking trail.



The Pacific, built in 1914: Will it ride the rails again?

Train: Private coaches, dining car

EASTMAN (SVS) — Competing for the 25 to 30 metre-wide, 46 kilometre tract of abandoned Canadian Pacific land between Lennoxville and Beebe is Jean-Paul Véronneau's *Nostalgie de la Vapeur*.

Operating as a railway company, the group wants to set up an old-fashioned steam train running from Sherbrooke to Beebe and back about three times daily for 11 months of the year.

Véronneau sees the abandoned CP line as a viable opportunity, and estimates that 100,000 people would use the train each year. His figures are based on a similar train that runs between Salem and Hillsborough, New Brunswick. That train operates only 4½ months a year and carries about 50,000 passengers, according to Véronneau.

NO STUDY
He said it would cost too much to commission a study to determine the proposal's economic merits.

The tourist train would run with a locomotive dating from about 1914, with antique coaches and caboose.

Although the locomotive would puff out real steam, the engine would run on propane, a cleaner fuel than coal or oil. Coaches would be equipped with septic tanks, unlike Via Rail trains which dump sewage directly on the tracks.

Tourists would be able to dine on the train, own their own coach, or simply take in the history of the passing townships. A special sunset train would run for romantics. "We need something to attract



Jean-Paul Veronneau and James Sweet: a steam train for the Beebe Subdivision.

the people," says Véronneau.

NOTHING TO DO

"As for tourist attractions in the Sherbrooke area I don't think we are very spoiled. You come down here and look at Lake Memphremagog, and the second day you could do without it. There's no attractions at all here. This would touch tourism in more than one way."

Véronneau said the municipalities along the line should purchase the land, while his company would

operate the train and maintain the tracks. But he said the train backers would be the land it they had to.

Nostalgie de la Vapeur is looking for shareholders to help finance the dream.

The group estimate the set-up cost of their project at about \$2 million.

With the train, shops and a restaurant, Véronneau expects the group would employ 52 people in its first year.

Shirley and Duncan Fortier recently bought land next to the railbed for a second home near Hatley Acres on Lake Massawippi. The rail line runs between their lot and the lake and they were told they would eventually be able to purchase the adjacent part.

"We bought with the idea that we would eventually have lake-front property," Shirley Fortier said.

PECKING ORDER

Canadian Pacific first offers the land under abandoned tracks to the federal government. Upon refusal they offer it to the province, then the municipalities, and—finally—to adjacent property owners.

According to Jacques Côté, executive director of CP's real estate department, the land is currently being offered to the provincial government.

If Quebec and then the municipalities refuse, the railway intends to offer the land to adjacent property owners—but would prefer to sell it as one tract rather than in numerous parcels, Côté said.

CHECKING AROUND

Euclid Harel of the Quebec ministry of transport, is in contact with other government departments to determine whether the government should buy the land.

"We've had some negative responses," said Harel, declining to say which departments had responded and which were not in-

terested.

While Transport Quebec itself is not interested, the department is consulting several other ministries: Agriculture, Energy, Mines and Resources; Industry and Commerce; Tourism; and Recreation, Hunting and Fishing.

WANTS QUEBEC BUY

Alain Larouche, head of the *Association touristique de l'Estrie*, said the tourism promotion group is talking with the Recreation Ministry and hopes the land will be purchased by the province.

"Ideally they will purchase the land. If it goes to the municipalities, then it will most likely be returned to adjacent property owners," Larouche said.

Larouche said the ATE supports the rails-to-trails movement, as part of the growing number of green corridors created throughout North America.

Now that it is not so clear she will get lake front property, landowner Shirley Fortier said she would choose the steam train.

"We wouldn't want people constantly walking past on weekends," she said. "The steam train would be more predictable."

But trail activists Vandermeulen and Baxter note that motorized vehicles already use the trail in winter, and many people walk along the lakeside tracks in summer.

In the past, Massawippi dock owners would occasionally find strangers on their docks—with or without CP in operation.

Sentier Massawippi's doubts that a steam train would be profitable, and claim the train would be an elitist form of travel, based on the price of a ticket rather than free access.

But they would prefer a train to dividing up the land, saying that keeping the land as a park allows municipalities to install public works such as sewer lines, and saves it for possible future use.

ELSEWHERE

In the United States an estimated 213 railbeds have been converted to trails, and another 231 proposals are being considered. In 33 states, 4378 kilometres of trails are reserved for hiking, biking and horse-back riding, with another 8906 proposed.

Closer to home, a rail line between Granby and Waterloo has just been bought by four municipalities which will make it into a recreational trail. A 30 km stretch of rail along Georgian Bay has been converted to a trail, and a 200 km trail is proposed between St-Jerome and Mont Laurier.

There are six or seven steam trains operating in Canada, including one north of Vancouver and one in New Brunswick. There are 300 in the United States.

Trail: Before it's too late

LENNOXVILLE (SVS) — *Sentier Massawippi* wants the CP rail line between Lennoxville and Beebe to be bought by one level of government or another—preferably the province—to convert the land to a "linear" park.

The rails-to-trails concept draws on the opportunity an abandoned railbed provides to hikers, bikers, horseback-riders, skiers, and other tourists seeking a convenient, safe and rich touring environment.

Among others, "teachers see possibilities for taking school groups because the trail would go along the rivers and the lake and that's where a lot of geological action is happening; that's where so much can be seen and understood about the region," says Tom Vandermeulen, a member of the *Sentier Massawippi's* coordinating committee.

Sentier Massawippi wants the trail reserved exclusively for non-motorized travel and leisure, saying that it could be policed in summer by a "student-ranger", but primarily by users and property owners along the way.

According to Vandermeulen, horseback riders need "trails that go somewhere."

As well, he said, "Cyclists need safe routes to follow. I saw kids on their bikes just a moment ago and it's dangerous on the roads. How about giving people in wheelchairs who are fit enough somewhere to go? This is a flat trail."

The growing number of green corridors across the continent are beginning to link national and provincial or state parks, giving both

humans and wildlife safe routes to large outdoor and recreational centres.

WANTS FREEZE

The *Sentier Massawippi* group wants a freeze on any dismantling or division of the Beebe Subdivision route, fearing the corridor and its bridges will be lost before the public is consulted.

The group wants a study to determine the feasibility and costs of such a project, and propose that the trail be funded by the provin-

cial or municipal governments and private sponsors.

They estimate the total cost of building the trail would be \$1 million.

Sentier Massawippi sells \$2 memberships to help fund its activities.

The group signed up about 150 new members at Canada Day celebrations on the weekend, and several hundred more signed its petition, said organizer Keith Baxter.

Lost? This new map may help

SHERBROOKE — The Sherbrooke area has a detailed new road map to call its own.

The full-color map includes detailed aerial views of all municipi-

palities in the Sherbrooke region with more than 2500 residents. It also identifies parks, schools, municipal services and other facilities available to residents.

The biggest challenge for the map-making firm *Cartographie Informatisee de l'Outaouais Inc.* (CIO) was to gather the right information to provide an up-to-date image of the 15 municipalities, said a communiqué from the Association of Estrie municipalities (AME).

CIO financed the map with assistance from 10 of the 15 municipalities, said the news release.

Fifty thousand copies were printed and are now available at \$2.95 each in convenience stores, gas stations, hotels, town halls and tourism offices throughout the Sherbrooke region.

The map was entirely prepared by computer and all the information on it is now available on disks.



Thetford Mines: Gunman gives up to police

THETFORD MINES (CP) — A special tactical squad of Quebec provincial police swept into an apartment building shortly after midnight and took a lone gunman prisoner Tuesday, ending a standoff that began more than 36 hours earlier.

No shots were fired and nobody was hurt.

"The man is being held for ques-

tioning," Quebec Police Force spokesman Cst. Réal Ouellet said in a telephone interview.

Investigators and prosecution lawyers must consult before deciding what charges will be laid.

Earlier Ouellet said the 34-year-old man had "a past history of violence and from what we know of him he can become violent at any

time."

The incident began Sunday afternoon, when the man walked into the QPF Thetford Mines detachment and started acting strangely.

"He didn't appear drunk, but he was in an abnormal state," Ouellet said. "His behavior was that of someone who is unbalanced.

The man made threats to an

officer before leaving quickly and returning to his apartment.

Shortly after the man left, a police tactical squad took up positions around the apartment building and about 15 residents were evacuated.

Ouellet said police were in constant contact with the man throughout the incident.

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