

Parties wait for CN Rail solution

■ Bathurst mayor says file has been quiet lately

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As the deadline approaches for when federal regulations would allow the abandonment process to begin on the Canadian National rail line that traverses northern New Brunswick, there seemingly hasn't been much recent activity on the file.

Bathurst Mayor Stephen Brunet, who has been involved with the Strategic Rail Asset Committee designed to find a solution to help keep the rail line operational, said he hasn't heard any update on the status of the project.

"It hasn't really been on the table lately, that I know of," he said, noting CN's focus in their region of late has been on checking on the condition and safety of the rail. "The last we heard about it, they had come to some sort of understanding that it had to be kept open and that they were working on ways to make that happen."

The Canadian National (CN) Railway announced in August 2012 that it was moving to close a 224-kilometre stretch of rail line that runs

from Moncton through Miramichi to the province's north, unless new business could be found to salvage it. CN has said that line has faced continuously declining traffic and they originally said it needed approximately \$50 million in repairs.

Jim Feeny, a spokesman for CN, said at the beginning of 2013 that the earliest any part of the main line could be discontinued, based on federal regulations, was April or May 2014. He noted at the time that freight levels on that line have dropped 60 per cent from 2006 levels.

Feeny did not respond to multiple requests for an update on the situation this week.

Likewise, the government was not able to provide an update on the file when asked this week.

Premier David Alward said back in August that the provincial government was at the stage of determining how much it will invest to save the line. He said those talks include the federal government and industry, who are also expected to make a financial contribution.

Alward also said at the time that the price tag of \$50 million is no longer as high after government and industry reviewed the state of the line.

But he said the dollars needed are "still very significant."

"Today I am not prepared to say what number it's going to mean," Alward said in August. "What I do believe is that investing in that line to ensure that we have industrial capacity in the north is important."

The lack of any recent news is concerning for interested stakeholders.

"We still have mining companies that are saying they are starting in 2014, and there will be product that will have to be shipped, so hopefully they can hang on and the rail will be there when these industries need them," Brunet said. "Miramichi now has their new panel plant up, we still have saw mills on either side of us here, so hopefully the provincial government is taking the bull by the horns."

Brunet said the prospect of losing the rail service "most definitely" makes him nervous.

"We need our rail. We've always had our rail going through, and our great fear is to lose that rail service," he said, noting he's optimistic a solution can be found.

"The rail has been part of our community since Canada was formed as a country, and we still want to be part of Canada, connected by rail."