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MONTREAL PORT AUTHORITY SEEKING NEW CEO

MONTREAL - The Montreal Port Authority is searching for a new president and chief executive officer less than 18 months after replacing long-time boss Dominic Taddeo.

The sudden departure of Patrice Pelletier, who the agency says had "different perspectives" from the board, comes in the midst of a \$2.5-billion expansion and upgrading project at the port.

Board chairman Marc Bruneau said in a news release late Tuesday that Mr. Pelletier's departure was related to a difference of opinion with the directors as to how to implement the corporate vision.

The statement thanked Mr. Pelletier for "his dynamism, his commitment and his contribution since his appointment" in September, 2007.

The process that led to the hiring of Mr. Pelletier as president and CEO at the port authority, which describes itself as an "autonomous federal agency," was fraught with political controversy.

Last year, the Bloc Quebecois said in the House of Commons that Dimitri Soudas, an official in Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Office, tried to persuade the port's board to hire the former director-general of the City of Montreal, Robert Abdallah.

Lawrence Cannon, the transport minister at the time, responded that the board ended up hiring the "best candidate," who turned out to be Mr. Pelletier, former president of L-3 Communications Spar Aerospace Ltd.

The port authority said yesterday that the board has created a selection committee to find a replacement for Mr. Pelletier and named Sylvie Vachon, vice-president of administration and human resources, as acting CEO.

Mr. Pelletier was unavailable for comment yesterday.

Federal Liberal transport critic Joe Volpe said in an interview yesterday that the political aspect of the hiring practices at the Montreal and other Canadian ports must be examined.

"One cannot exclude the issue of political interference. It's got to be looked at," he said.

The port authorities are supposed to be completely independent and at arm's length from political considerations, Mr. Volpe said, adding that the Harper government has "become more pro-active on [whom] they want on those port authorities." The Montreal Port Authority last year unveiled a 12-year infrastructure program aimed at tripling its container capacity to the equivalent of 4.5 million 20-foot container units.

The port occupies 25 kilometres of Montreal's waterfront and bills itself as the world's largest inland port.