

Council Approves \$105K Budget Increase for Train Crossing Safety Assessments

Council has approved a \$105,000 budget increase to fund safety assessments at Aurora's four train crossings.

The goal of these assessments is to determine what safety improvements are needed to allow for the eventual cessation of train whistles in the area—a move aimed at benefiting residents living near the crossings.

The decision is part of a multi-year process that, if successful, could lead Aurora to follow other York Region municipalities, such as Whitchurch-Stouffville and King, in passing a bylaw to eliminate train whistles at its crossings.

The safety assessments will examine crossings at Engelhard Drive, Wellington Street East, Centre Street, and St. John's Side Road. Construction of additional safety measures at the St. John's crossing is already underway, managed by Metrolinx, as part of an agreement between the Town and the Region in 2022.

Nancy Flemming, Manager of Engineering Services, was called to give more context on the motion, stating that the budget increase was a matter of volume.

"We are going to undertake the safety assessment [at St John's]. That money has already been approved through the 2025 capital budget. If Council chooses to undertake a safety assessment for the other three crossings, then this additional funding of \$105,000 to a total of \$200,000 will allow us to undertake a safety assessment for all four crossings within the one study."

This is not the first time Aurora has considered ceasing the train whistles. According to the 2025 report requesting the budget increase, in 2019 an assessment was performed to find out what kind of effect whistle cessation would have on safety at the crossings. The evaluation was conducted by a third-party engineering consultant on behalf of the Town of Halton Hills and concluded that stopping the whistles will negatively impact safety for all road users. The current assessments will focus on determining what upgrades are necessary to make the crossings safe enough to consider stopping the whistles.

There were mixed opinions on the motion shared by Council members at the meeting.

Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner voiced strong criticism about the additional costs involved.

She noted that the report did not include earlier agreements with the Region that had already addressed safety measures for the crossings on Region-owned roads: Wellington and St John's.

"This was all settled in 2010, and now we're in a position where we have to redo the technical assessment, which is going to cost taxpayers more money."

Still, she expressed her support for the project, stating, "It's very disappointing that residents still have to listen to train whistles. It's very hard to have a quality of life if you live near the train tracks."

Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese stressed the value of the assessments beyond train whistle cessation.

"While the motion looks like it's stopping train horns, in my mind, the motion is really about making each of our level crossings safe to the highest standard," said Weese. "So, that's why I am looking for the safety assessment first—to identify what needs to be done...and then, should we need upgrades—which I'm quite sure we're going to—then we can come back for an additional budget at another time."

According to the report, additional safety measures that may have to be implemented at these train crossings include pedestrian maze barriers and gates, improved sidewalk connections, AODA compliant tactile walking plates, and additional signage and pavement

markings.

Councillor Weese also expressed his hope that further partnerships may be able to offset the cost of this project.

"My hope is that we will find partners, such as Metrolinx and the Region, to be able to help us out from a budgetary standpoint. And then, and only then, will we come back again to Council at some time to get a bylaw that would allow us to send this to Transport Canada, and perhaps have the cessation."

Council is expected to revisit the matter once the safety assessments are completed and determine what further actions may be necessary to move forward with whistle cessation.

By Selena Loureiro