

Regional deal could get anti-train whistle goals back on track

A potential agreement with the Region of York could give new hope to residents looking to see an end to train whistles in Aurora and improve pedestrian safety at the same time.

Council last week considered a recommendation from staff to once again give the thumbs-down to several measures that would need to be in place in order for GO Trains to dampen their horns as they pass through Town.

Among the primary reasons cited by staff against anti-whistle measures included costs required to make the level crossings at Engelhard Drive, Wellington Street East, Centre Street, and St. John's Sideroad safer for pedestrians and any liabilities being assumed by the Town.

Just before last Tuesday's General Committee meeting, however, a partnership with the Region could help reduce both Aurora's costs and liabilities should Council move ahead.

If Council proceed with anti-whistling measures, Mayor Tom Mrakas informed Council that the Region is willing to take on the liability where the train crosses Wellington and St. John's Sideroad as they are Regional roads.

With just the Engelhard and Centre crossings to consider, this would significantly reduce costs incurred by the Town and, in turn, taxpayers.

"We have long advocated to the Region with regards to the liability and liability has been the issue [that] has been holding us back on this," said Mayor Mrakas. "At no point does anyone in this room want to put liability on our Town, on our residents, where an accident could occur and the Town could be liable for anything that could occur. With that being said, we have advocated long and hard with the Region, with all levels of government, that this shouldn't be the issue. Metrolinx should either hold the liability or it should be one of the other levels of government.

"Obviously, we want to create a safe environment. The funds are not the issue, we can fit it within our budget, we can develop the [pedestrian] mazes and do all of that stuff [but] if we remove the whistles and the liability falls on us, that is a no-go. We can't put the Town in that type of position."

The potential agreement with the Region was greeted warmly at the Council table and while Council voted to delay any further decisions on the matter until its May 3 General Committee meeting, lawmakers said the latest development could significantly change the discussion.

"I believe this does change the scenario a lot for certain intersections," said Councillor Sandra Humfryes, adding she would like to see further analysis on what the Town's liabilities would be by the May 3 meeting.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner added that if the crossings at Wellington and St. John's are taken out of the equation, the costs to put the pedestrian measures in place would be significantly less than the \$1 million-plus for all four crossings previously noted by staff.

"The figures for Aurora would actually be \$254,000 for the Municipal Safety Audit and for two maze barriers," she said. "We might want to add Cousins Drive to that ? that would only cost \$46,000? so that comes to \$300,000 which, in the scheme of things for safety and quality of life, is a relatively small amount.

"I would like to add that we have a lot of liability now, should an accident happen. I think we would want to update our safety at those crossings."

The potential Regional deal was also welcomed by Councillor Harold Kim, but he said he wanted to have further conversations with

the City of Markham, which has successfully put anti-whistle measures in place, on their costs and liabilities. He also requested further information on alternatives, including pressing Metrolinx to reduce horn sounds at certain hours and locations, particularly the short job between the Wellington and Centre crossings.

?I would like to see if that conversation could be had and?whether or not there are some cost-sharing opportunities,? he said. ?From what I understand, Markham had some cost-sharing opportunities to support their project, so that is something I would like to see in the next report as well.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter