

Residents renew calls to make Aurora a whistle-free community

It's a track that has been travelled many times but has ultimately led nowhere, but Aurora residents are once again calling on Council to undertake measures to reduce or eliminate train-whistles as they pass through Town.

Council will further explore the possibilities of a train whistle cessation program ? along with any cost and liability issues ? through a future report following delegations to Council by area residents Susan Morton Leonard and Lynn Brown, both of whom said it was time for Council to put the needs of residents first.

In stating her case, Ms. Morton Leonard cited a decision made by the present Council in 2019 not to proceed with a raft of new pedestrian safety measures at level crossings, such as where the trains cross Wellington Street East and Centre Street.

?The issue is more than blaring train horns, it's about adding modern safety equipment to protect the daily foot traffic moving across the four level crossings in Aurora,? she said, adding ?constant daily noise pollution? from the resulting train horns is impacting the wellbeing of residents. ?Suspending train horns will also lessen the noise competition for outdoor events and activities held in Town Park and elsewhere in the Cultural Precinct, a short block west of the tracks.

?Upgraded safety equipment has been installed to protect vehicular traffic from commuter trains moving through Aurora's downtown core. Are vehicles more important to Council than pedestrian safety? Why would Council vote against joining the 21st century by protecting everyone's safety at all level crossings? People who are deaf, blind, deal with mobility issues, have mental health conditions often exacerbated by loud, unexpected noises ? plus those unfamiliar with the practice of train whistles ? are still at risk. They are not protected by archaic train whistling.?

When Council last considered the measures that would need to be in place to meet standards for a whistle cessation program, the price tag stood at just over \$1.1 million. This, said Ms. Morton Leonard, was a ?bargain price? compared with the Town's other recent capital projects.

?Foot traffic is comprised of more than GO Train commuters, [it is] GO Bus users, high school students and people attending the Library, Aurora Community Centre, Town Park, Sheppard's Bush, the Leisure Complex, industry and retail,? she said. ?People need to cross the tracks daily. Shouldn't Council care about pedestrians who are not commuters safely crossing the tracks?

?The number of trains moving through Aurora will increase. Every 15 minutes, a train will travel through Town blaring its horn. Metrolinx' July 2021 study [notes] that in the near future, commuter trains will be used more for tourism and family leisure visits than for work commutes. Does Council want tourists and citizens coming to Aurora visiting the new Town Square to be overwhelmed by frequent blaring train horns? The reason why this Council did not fund train whistle cessation? in 2019, according to the staff report, is cost and not wanting to accept liability for crossing upgrades. The influence of no action taken by surrounding municipalities dealing with the same issue is also a factor. When will Council make decisions based on Aurora citizens' needs??

She challenged Council to look at what the City of Markham did working with Metrolinx to solve the issue and said a \$2 million price tag for safety upgrades is a ?reasonable? cost.

Ms. Brown followed Ms. Morton Leonard in a delegation that just happened to be timed for a whistling train to pass by on the other side of her back fence.

The whistles, said Ms. Brown, leaves her feeling ?almost as if you have no outdoor space whatsoever in the house that you own.

?The noise is horrendous,? she said. ?I get a lot of comments from people who say, ?Oh, well you moved by the tracks. Why don't you just accept it or move on?" I have been here a long time, since 2001; I moved to the tracks, yes, there were three going south and three coming north and it wasn't such an issue. Then it increased and increased and there are people all around my neighbourhood

who are even considering moving and I wanted to take a stand.?

Council picked up the challenge, with Councillor Rachel Gilliland making a successful motion calling on staff to consider the comments made by the delegates while drafting a new report looking at the options.

?Because Centre Street is so close to Wellington, [conductors] have to honk the horn four times,? said Councillor Gilliland. ?By the time they have crossed over Centre Street, that is eight times. I can appreciate that sometimes these horns continue on much, much further past those tracks than perhaps is? it is upsetting, it is very noisy and I totally get it.?

Councillor Wendy Gaertner also voiced her support.

?We have a lot of residents who live along the tracks and with the trains going every seven minutes with more to come,? she said. ?It is very concerning and sound travels a long way. I used to live on Walton Drive and I could hear the train. It was my morning alarm clock.?

Getting a new report was approved unanimously by Council.

HAVE YOUR SAY ? Are train whistles a problem in Aurora? Should Council revisit a train whistle cessation program? Send your thoughts to brock@lpcmedia.ca.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter