

Train whistle cessation inches forward at Committee

Efforts to implement a train whistle cessation program in Aurora inched forward last week.

Sitting at the Committee level, Council voted to consider \$95,000 in the Town's 2023 Capital Budget towards the detailed design and peer review of pedestrian safety measures at St. John's Sideroad, the first move in making an anti-whistle program a reality.

The scope of the project being considered by Council has been greatly reduced from when it was first on the table earlier this spring.

Metrolinx's plans to build a traffic and pedestrian underpass beneath the Wellington Street crossing to accommodate its future goal of all-day both-way 15-minute service on the Barrie GO line eliminated both it and potentially the Centre Street crossing from the equation, leaving just the crossings at St. John's Sideroad and Engelhard Drive in Council's focus.

But their plans to ramp up service, and the frequency the train passes over each crossing, has made train whistle cessation both a safety and quality-of-life issue for residents, Councillors argued.

‘Residents deserve that quality-of-life component,’ said Councillor Rachel Gilliland. ‘I couldn't imagine backing onto [the tracks] and listening to that horn every 15 minutes of the day. I think it would just drive everyone to lunacy, to be quite honest. What is the balance?’

Part of that balance is weighing the risk and liability that the Town might have to take on to make the program a reality.

‘Given the fact that Centre and Wellington will have cessation by default with the way it is being constructed, I am very glad to hear that the liability would be assumed [by the Region] for St. John's. I think we should continue on with investigating Engelhard down the road.’

Councillor Wendy Gaertner was of a similar mindset, adding: ‘We have a duty to our residents and it does speak to safety and quality of life. There will be a whistle blowing every 7.5 minutes because trains will be passing.’

As a final decision on whether to proceed to Budget will not be made until the Council meeting at the end of this month, both Councillors Gilliland and Gaertner requested further information on how the City of Markham got it done.

Engelhard was also on the radar of Councillor John Gallo, who said liability at that crossing would be something Council would need to consider.

‘It makes sense to me to move towards removing the whistles and having the Region take liability,’ one, really, at St. John's Sideroad,’ he said. ‘Wellington is an underpass, so they wouldn't blow the whistle there anyway. It's really Engelhard that we would be responsible for and that makes sense to move forward on that.’

While Councillor Sandra Humfries said she still had concerns on the amount of legal liability the Town might have to take on if a train whistle cessation program becomes a reality, she said further detailed discussions would have to take place come Budget-time this fall.

‘At the end of the day it does become a local liability issue for the Town and it does become a budget issue,’ she said. ‘It's something to allow the areas where there's lots of residential around [the tracks] where there's some room for improvement to their quality of life, and the horns should only get worse as this escalates.’

‘This is a complete budget discussion [understanding] the different safety measures,’ lots of things have been added to try and compensate from the cessation of the whistle. It's tough. Sometimes the bottom line is affordability,’ raising it up to the Region to

see how they can help us. We can do these two areas [St. John's and Engelhard] or one [St. John's], but when you look at it all, maybe a full-view approach [and] see how this goes by the time our next meeting comes into effect.?

From the perspective of Mayor Tom Mrakas, it too came down to the same issues of liability and safety.

?If the liability remains, I am not in favour of moving forward and putting the Town in that position ? our residents and taxpayers,? he said. ?But, if it is about safety?by all means I have no problem with us looking at adding this to the 2023 Budget and putting in pedestrian crossings over Engelhard in anticipation that the Province or Metrolinx will continue to hold liability and at that time we can move forward with whistle cessation.

?If it is about safety, let's go ahead, move forward and put those added safety measures in place for our residents. I think all of us agree we want to do what is in the best interests of our community to ensure our residents remain safe at all times. Let's do that if that is what this is about. By no means am I willing to put the municipality in harm's way and increasing liability in this case when we know it is going to increase our liability.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter