

Train whistles could continue to blow pending Council decision this week

By Brock Weir

In just a few short years, the number of GO Trains moving through the Town will significantly increase as Metrolinx ramps up all-day, two-way service between Aurora and Toronto.

But, despite an increase in trains and train whistles, Council is poised to vote down another costly flirtation with a whistle cessation program.

Sitting at the Committee level last week, Council gave a thumbs-down to a \$235,000 project to muffle whistles as trains pass at road-level crossings.

With the crossing at Wellington Street East taken out of the equation as Metrolinx moves towards grade separation at that location, that leaves three crossings in the mix: Engelhard Drive, Centre Street, and St. John's Sideroad.

In order to implement whistle cessation at these crossings, two maze barriers would need to be constructed at the first two for pedestrian safety at \$20,000 apiece, while a more elaborate set of four pedestrian gates would need to be installed at St. John's, at a cost of \$800,000.

The detailed design of the project would clock in at \$135,000 with a further \$100,000 for peer review as required by Metrolinx. Although Council members voted down the project at last week's General Committee meeting, the decision still needs to be formally ratified by Council and, at first blush, the idea did have some supporters.

Originally, I was not in favour of whistle cessation, more because of the cost, but as we have all experienced, there has been a substantial increase in the number of trains, said Mayor Geoff Dawe. There are now 18 trains that go south and 18 trains that go north every day, so the usage of that track has changed dramatically just over the last year and half year since adding the midday service. I think we have to change how we think about that disruption to our residents in the area. Other towns are doing it.

Markham, specifically, is in the process of implementing a comprehensive anti-whistling plan.

The direction, he said, is for the engineer to not use the whistle as long as he or she feels the crossing is safe, but, if not, the whistle would still be an option.

Also supporting another whistle cessation program was Councillor Sandra Humfries, who said Council needs to listen to the residents who have voiced their concerns.

Over the last couple of years I have had some residents contact me about that some new and some not-so-new residents, she said. Now the frequency of the trains is constant and it used to be once every few hours. It has changed, it is very different now. Approval ultimately fizzled, however, amid concerns that there was not enough information available on the risks and liabilities the Town might take on through a whistle cessation program, along with the view that voting in favour of it would saddle the next Council with the \$235,000 project whether they like it or not.

I think we should be moving to listen to our residents who are complaining about the train whistling. Knowing there are going to be more and more trains, it is going to be more and more of an issue especially as mentioned, said Councillor Jeff Thom. After thinking a lot about it, we're going to spend \$235,000 for the design peer review and the bulk of the cost are going to come in the 2019 budget. Obviously none of us can predict what the makeup of Council will be or the interest of the community moving forward with the project for 2019. Why would we spend \$235,000 at the end of this term of Council and then have the project potentially not move forward next term? Then we would have potentially wasted \$235,000 if the next Council doesn't proceed.

Councillor Paul Pirri largely agreed, adding, I don't think anyone expects me to say this, but I have softened my position. I am no longer vehemently opposed to this, I am just opposed to it.

I recognize that there have been changes in the train frequency over the last few years and there is anticipated to be some more, he said. I still struggle with the fact individuals have moved close to a train yard and train tracks and are now asking for the train whistles to stop blowing.

Councillor Michael Thompson, on the other hand, said the report's note that the Town assumes full liability for potential claims gave him pause.

I would like to see perhaps now and next week maybe a little bit of an update with regards to the insurance end or liability risk associated with the report, he said. I appreciate the dollar cost and so forth to the projects but I think that is another consideration.