

Toronto Star - Opinion / Readers' Letters

Follow U.S. lead on rail safety

Published on Thu Mar 20 2014

Re: Hazardous train freight shouldn't be kept secret, expert says, March 15

Knowing what is moving by rail through the city is not really tackling the issue of safety concerns that are currently distressing the public. The real issue is that the safety mechanisms that could be installed have not been installed, because these cost money.

While we as a society appear to see it as a standard practice to invest in roads, airports and marine ports, we fail to extend the same logic to our railways. So is it any wonder that it leaves something to be desired? So long as we as a society are subsidizing the private railways' competition, which would mainly be roads, there is going to be a real lack of incentive to put private capital into a substantial infrastructure upgrade. The government will have to be a partner in some form.

If we are going to be so concerned about railway safety, as many would say we should be, then Canada should follow the lead of the U.S., which has mandated that railway lines carrying either hazardous freight or passenger trains, or both, must have a signal system that includes a computer override if a red is disobeyed by the locomotive engineer. This system is called Positive Train Control.

The event that spawned the Positive Train Control legislated requirement in the U.S. was the 2008 Metrolink-Union Pacific crash in California, caused by a commuter train driver ignoring a red signal because he was texting on his cellphone. Positive Train Control would have stopped the train and prevented that accident. Lac Mégantic could be the equivalent event for Canada to enact similar legislation, and put some much needed financial support into our rail network.

It does not advance the discussion to simply ask the public what they think about oil trains. Obviously, people will be opposed to having it in their neighbourhood. People are opposed to pipelines carrying oil in their neighbourhood as well. However, if both pipelines and rail lines were to stop carrying oil and other hazardous freight, an extremely discomfoting volume of tanker trucks hauling such freight across Highway 401 through Toronto would result to pick up the slack — and if one of those trucks were to explode and cause significant structural damage, Highway 401 could be closed for quite some time.

Polling should tell people that such is the alternative to transporting oil by pipeline and railway — because that oil will be transported somehow at the end of the day. Makes one wonder how that would affect the poll results.

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