

BACKGROUND TO AIR RAIL LINK ISSUE

In November 2003, then Transport Minister David Collenette announced that SNC Lavalin would operate a yet to be constructed Air Rail Link (ARL) between Pearson Airport and Union Station.

On December 8, 2004, the Environmental Assessment (EA) group B notice for the Air Rail Link was released. A few citizens who had been monitoring this issue met in early January with Councillor Frances Nunziata and representatives from GO Transit (Greg Ashbee), SNC Lavalin (Stephan Mehr) and Fouad Moustafa (from another consulting firm). It was clear that with the speed and frequency of the service, the existing at-grade road/rail crossings could not remain. We were shown preliminary drawings that indicated about 100 houses would be torn down or access closed or rerouted if bridges or tunnels replaced the at-grade crossings in Weston.

After consulting with interested Weston leaders, we met again on February 7 with GO and SNC. At that time, it became clear that GO had hired SNC as its consultant for the EA process. **Since SNC had also been chosen to operate the ARL, we felt that this was a conflict of interest.** We raised that issue at the March GO Board meeting, and at their April meeting, they apparently agreed to do a 'peer review' of the EA after SNC completed its report.

Although Mr. Collenette had apparently stated that no public money would be spent on this ARL, it has become clear that this is not the case. Tax dollars will pay for GO Transit to install a third set of tracks along the Georgetown GO route which will be used exclusively by SNC for the ARL. Regular GO users will not have access to Track 1 at Union Station as they always have had as the ARL will now use it for the Blue 22 train. The Federal Department of Transport has transferred money slated for the redevelopment of the Toronto Waterfront to the Greater Toronto Airport Authority (a private company) to pay for the ARL station at Pearson Airport.

The EA process is itself flawed:

- GO's Class B EA requires public notice of 'concept alternatives' if GO's needs assessment determines construction is necessary.
- GO had a needs assessment for the Georgetown additions, but not for the ARL.
- Neither of GO's public notices included ANY other 'concept alternatives'.
- Instead, their idea of "concept alternatives"(from the presentation notes) were such things as 'putting the rails north or south of the existing rail. These are "design alternatives"'.
• The 'do nothing option' (the option of maintaining the status quo), which must be considered along with any other possible alternatives, was not presented in any public meetings to date.
 - For example, the Ontario Motor Coach association wanted to create a busway along the corridor
 - The Eglinton subway was to have gone to Pearson Airport.
 - Another study suggested a light rail line on Highway 427.

None of these alternatives are apparently intended for discussion at the meeting on April 28. Instead, we seem to have skipped the 'concept' step of the EA. It appears that we are required to accept the ARL as a done deal: we are only asked for comment on the design issues.

Many facets of the Weston community have issues with the ARL proposal.

- The closure or re-routing of local streets will cause traffic chaos in and around Weston and the tracks will divide the Weston community.
- The increase in the frequency of trains from 31 per day to nearly 200 per day, the removal of the current speed limit of 35 mph, and the resulting noise will make it impossible for nearby schools and churches to continue operations in their current location near the tracks.
- Smoke, fumes and dust from 200 diesel locomotives rumbling through per day will leave Weston with increased pollution, dirt and grime
- The hundreds of residents who live along or near the tracks will have their properties affected and values plummet.
- The installation of bridges and/or tunnels, whether for pedestrians or vehicles, will cause new safety and security issues for pedestrians.
- 'Burying' the railbed is apparently not an option, as GO has stated that it could mean closing the Weston GO Station, and dangerous freight cannot be confined in tunnels. Also it is a 'design alternative' and should only be considered after all the other 'concept' alternatives for the ARL have been ruled out by the EA.

The issue of who's paying for this project to be built must be addressed. SNC has made it clear that user fees for their train will be expensive and it will service only a small portion of the population. Their train will not stop in Weston but may stop at Woodbine Racetrack. If this is the case, why should public money subsidize this operation to the tune of tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars.

Finally there's the issue of accountability. Apparently, while the Federal Government has decided that the ARL will be operated by SNC Lavalin, it is asking GO, the GTAA, CN and the City of Toronto to be the signatories on any contracts with SNC. So, the Federal and Provincial governments will not be party to any agreements, but are providing the public money to make it happen.

In preparation for the April 28 meeting, we have asked GO to supply the community with answers to many questions, and for copies of the studies that preceded the Environmental Assessment. GO has provided one copy of the studies (which we hope to make available in the Library) but it refuses to make more copies. We have asked for copies of all the agreements between SNC Lavalin and the various agencies, but so far have not been able to see them. We are still awaiting answers to questions asked at a meeting convened by Councillor Nunziata on April 4, including such simple questions as 'will they be seeking to increase the train speed limit (currently 35 mph) in Weston?'