

Premier McGuinty: Metrolinx Caught Spinning Health Impacts on Ontario Citizens

Toronto, September 17, 2009...Metrolinx's plans to add hundreds of diesel-powered trains a day to the rail line in West Toronto will create significant health impacts and add to Toronto's smog problem by emitting toxic chemicals into the air, according to the results of Metrolinx' own air quality assessment. These emissions are known to cause cancer, cardiovascular disease and respiratory illnesses with the greatest impact on young children and the elderly.

Diesel is the most polluting transportation fuel available as it produces microscopic particles that are small enough to get into human lungs and the bloodstream. Metrolinx has not studied the most dangerous factor in the exhaust, fine particulate matter, on the basis that Ontario's dated standards do not require it despite adverse effects that current health science now indicates. While moving people from cars into trains is a good idea, more trains will only add to air pollution levels, not decrease it unless these trains are electric. Unfortunately regional growth means the highways will backfill.

Yesterday, Metrolinx issued 'clarifications' to their environmental assessment final report on plans for the Georgetown South route in a letter to Environment Minister John Gerretsen. Responding to new information provided after the Province's legal deadline of July 31st, Doctor David McKeown, Toronto's Chief Medical Officer of Health, reaffirmed that electric trains along this new rail corridor are the only healthy solution for Toronto. In his revised statement, McKeown states, "I remain concerned about the air quality impacts and increased health risks predicted for the immediately adjacent communities as a result of the proposed diesel expansion."

Upon receipt of Doctor McKeown's statement, Metrolinx CEO Robert Prichard has now announced through the media that McKeown is entirely recanting. Prichard claims authoritatively that the project is healthy and safe so should be approved.

The Clean Train Coalition, a community-based group petitioning for the electrification of the rail line, strongly objects to the spin being given McKeown's statements as the unnecessary health risks posed by this project are again downplayed. "This attempt by Metrolinx to twist McKeown's letter into an endorsement of their plan just shows what we've been up against" said Lin Grist, Clean Train Coalition. "We think any increase in pollution levels is unacceptable, especially when reductions could be achieved using electric technology that is already standard practice in countries around the globe."

McKeown's official objection to this project's environmental assessment still stands, despite what Metrolinx CEO Prichard wants people to believe. "The Medical Officer of Health and the public expects the electrification of the corridor before any expansion of service to the Georgetown corridor," states Grist, who is the Coalition's Health advocate. "Metrolinx has misconstrued Toronto Public Health's position about this in their Transit Project Assessment Final Report. To now portray it to Environment Minister John Gerretsen and the public as there are no longer health concerns is absolutely shameful."

It is within the ability of Metrolinx to electrify the route between the busiest train station in the country and our busiest airport as a priority, and to meet service expansion targets by getting people out of cars and into non-polluting trains. The regional Electrification Study now being designed can be tasked to include planning for this outcome. Budgets for a diesel-based service expansion project can be reapplied to the costs of an electrified expansion, or Metrolinx can be allowed to pursue a risk-filled and wasteful course of expanding service with diesel trains and eventually electrifying sometime in the future.

"Premier McGuinty, it is past time to put a halt to plans for using diesel trains on this project and to start planning to electrify the Georgetown South rail corridor. Improvements to transit should move forward responsibly and sustainably to the benefit of Ontario citizens, and not to our peril", says Grist on behalf of the Coalition.

The Coalition intends to demonstrate the concern of the public in a corridor-long rally on Saturday, September 26th.

*For more information on **The Human Train**, see www.cleantrain.ca.*