

UNION STATION-PEARSON AIRPORT LINK

Environmental assessment process to be shortened for Blue 22

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The creation of a train linking Union Station to Pearson International Airport appears to have been fast-tracked after more than a decade mired in bureaucratic tangles and objections from local residents.

A new, shortened environmental assessment process adopted by the project's proponent, Metrolinx, could require as little as six months, as opposed to the three or more years taken by the previous assessment process.

Details about how much the air-rail link will cost, how long it will take to build, and whether the project will differ from the Blue 22 plan first proposed six years ago will be determined after the assessment has begun this spring, said Colleen Bell, a spokeswoman for Metrolinx. The Ontario Crown corporation announced in December that it would take over the project from GO Transit, although GO will still help build the infrastructure.

"It will be a new study; however, all of the community concerns and the data that was collected as part of the previous study will be validated, brought forward and considered as part of this one," she said.

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Mike Sullivan, who heads the Weston Community Coalition, is suspicious about the reasons for coming up with a new environmental assessment process. "I think the 'accelerated' EA was designed specifically for this project," he said.

"Under the rules of a full EA, which the government promised, not only would other routes have to be at least considered, but the socio-economic impact on the local community had to be addressed. Now they can give that part lip service and we have no recourse."

Weston residents worry their community will end up divided, choked by fumes, assaulted by noise and excluded from any benefits. The Blue 22 plan would have sent diesel trains on a 22-minute trip through the Georgetown corridor, stopping only once at Dundas West station. The proposed ticket price was \$20.

It's not the prospect of an air-rail link that upsets them, said Suri Weinberg-Linsky, another coalition member. It's the prospect of an above-ground diesel train constantly passing through town without stopping there, blocking roads along the way.

Weston residents submitted their views on Blue 22 in October, 2006, under the old environmental assessment process, she said. "Every letter that we sent to the ministry was 'Well, it's in this person's hands,' or 'It's on this person's desk,' or 'We're getting to it,' or 'We'll get back to you,' and two years passed," she said.

Ms. Bell said that assessment never made it beyond the preliminary stages.

Scott Armstrong, a spokesman for the Greater Toronto Airport Authority, said he hopes the shortened process means travellers will finally have a way to get to the airport without being hampered by conditions like the recent snowstorm that caused mayhem during the year's busiest travelling days.

"The taxis are naturally slower in a snowstorm, so the train would offer just a constant back and forth," he said.

An air-rail link should be more than just a fast way to get to the airport, Ms. Weinberg-Linsky said. "If you build it, build it right. Build it so that people can get on it at multiple locations. Build it so it's electric, not diesel, because diesel is outmoded, antiquated, obsolete technology."

Laura Albanese, Liberal MPP for York South-Weston, said her understanding was that the community would still get to have its say. "I've been saying all along that the local residents must benefit from this, hopefully with a transportation hub. It has to be part of the community; it cannot be built at the expense of the community."

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