

Residents seek alternatives to air-rail link

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Mary Louise Ashbourne received the only standing ovation during the four-hour public meeting Wednesday night at the Faith Sanctuary where community members voiced their concerns over the contentious airport transportation link.

With GO Transit officials and consultants seated at the front, Ashbourne stepped up to the microphone and said what was on the minds of the estimated 1,000 local residents inside the church.

"The possibility of building an air-rail link should absolutely be removed," Ashbourne said to loud applause.

Others lined up to ask their own questions at the first of several public consultation meetings scheduled as part of the more thorough environmental assessment GO Transit has agreed to undertake due to public pressure and dissatisfaction over the initial study.

GO Transit had originally studied the expansion of its Georgetown line along the CN Weston rail corridor to handle more commuters coming into the city from Peel and Halton regions.

But what had Weston residents up in arms was the proposed air-rail link, which would travel along the same rail corridor, was presented as the only solution to providing a reliable, direct transportation connection from Union station to Pearson airport.

They argued the 200 privately owned Blue 22 diesel-run trains traveling back and forth under the air-rail link proposal would cut Weston in half, contributing to increased pollution and the deterioration of their quality of life.

The new environmental assessment will now examine other alternatives for a rapid transportation link from the airport to downtown Toronto, which included, but not limited to, the following.

- * Express bus service between Union station and the airport using exclusive bus lanes on the Gardiner Expressway and Hwy. 427.
- * Rapid transit service within the Eglinton corridor (possibly via an Eglinton subway line).
- * Rapid transit service using the Hwy. 427 corridor between Kipling subway station and the airport.
- * Rapid transit service using the GO Lakeshore line and up Hwy. 427 to the airport (monorail).
- * Georgetown South corridor subway.
- * Widen current freeways or build new roads to ease traffic congestion.

The proposed air-rail link was, however, still on the table despite residents like Ashbourne calling for its removal as a viable option.

"We are mandated to looking at all the alternatives," replied Imants Hausmanis, GO Transit corridor manager. "We are mandated to follow the process."

That process seems to have now been delayed for at least another two months.

Mike Sullivan, chair of the Weston Community Coalition, requested the meeting be adjourned and continued at a later date as people started to file out of the sanctuary after sitting for more than four hours.

With only half the presentations by transit officials completed, Sullivan wanted residents to stay for the next presentation.

"The next part of the meeting was how they (GO Transit) would make the choices," said Sullivan, explaining the evaluation method to determine which of the alternatives they end up choosing is "vague." "People don't understand what value system is going to be used to choose the preferred method. Is it cost? The number of passengers? We don't know because they didn't say."

Hausmanis agreed to continue the meeting in September to provide those answers.

The original project schedule, which proposed documenting all the alternatives to be studied, known as the terms of reference, to the Ministry of Environment for approval by the end of summer, will now have to wait until after the fall meeting.