

TRANSPORTATION: Air-rail link community meetings set for February

By CLARK KIM

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A revised proposal that would see an air-rail link connecting Union Station to Pearson airport through Weston was announced this week by the provincial agency responsible for improving the regional transportation network in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area.

Metrolinx, a crown agency of Ontario, will be overseeing the project that also includes looking into expanding service on the Georgetown GO Transit line to Etobicoke and Brampton.

But Metrolinx chair Rob MacIsaac assured that community input will be gathered before formally starting the environmental assessment process.

"We want to hear from communities along the corridor," said MacIsaac. "Listening to the public will be fundamental to the success of this very important transportation project."

Six such public consultations will be taking place starting Feb. 3 with two of those meetings to be held in the former city of York.

The air-rail link, also referred to as Blue-22, has been a contentious issue in Weston with initial plans showing a high-speed train cutting Weston in half, closing some streets, and separating homes from nearby businesses.

Local residents were also concerned about the increase in pollution as a result of having diesel-powered trains run through Weston without even making a stop in the community to pick up passengers.

While Metrolinx stressed it is committed to public consultations, some preliminary information was unveiled Wednesday about what will be studied in the environmental assessment process.

That includes reviewing proposed plans to upgrade the current GO Transit Weston stop to a full Weston GO station for both GO Transit and air-rail link trains.

It also includes a proposal to maintain Weston community connectivity by adding a GO rail tunnel in Weston so that Church and King streets are kept open with fewer rail crossing delays than what exists currently. John Street would then be converted into a pedestrian crossing.

York South-Weston MPP Laura Albanese said Metrolinx's announcement was an improvement from what was originally planned.

"It has benefits for Weston," said Albanese, specifically noting the air-rail link would have a stop in Weston and the proposed tunnel would keep some streets open. "I have

maintained that a plan to reduce the impact on the local community must be a priority. I'm glad to see that Metrolinx is listening to these concerns."

Albanese was also pleased to hear the Georgetown corridor has been designated by Metrolinx to be electrified in the first phase of its regional transportation plan, which would effectively reduce the negative environmental impact.

But a timeline hasn't been set and until electrification of the corridor takes place. Albanese learned that, according to Metrolinx, air-rail link trains will use "fully-modernized clean diesel rail engines with stringent emission controls."

Paul Ferreira, a local resident and the former NDP MPP for York South-Weston who fought against Blue-22 during his 2007 by-election campaign, said he still had some "grave concerns" about the project.

With Metrolinx confirming the air-rail link component of the project will be financed and operated by a private sector operator, Ferreira was worried about the connection being nothing but a fast shuttle between the airport and Union Station.

"It sounds a heck of a lot like Blue-22," said Ferreira. "I see nothing about this being a true affordable option. We want this to be public transit."

Ferreira also noted that instead of having multiple stops along the air-rail link as some local residents requested, Metrolinx is only considering a potential future stop at Woodbine where a multi-million dollar entertainment complex is slated for development.

"Blue-22 isn't dead. It's still here as Black Jack-21," said Ferreira, planning to participate in the upcoming consultation process. "We won't go away with our objections."

Albanese said that Metrolinx assured her the community will have ample opportunity to be heard before submitting a final project proposal.

The consultations in Toronto will be taking place on the following dates and locations.

- Tuesday, Feb. 3, 11 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., The Lithuanian House, 1573 Bloor St. W.
- Wednesday, Feb. 4, 11 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., Mount Dennis United Church, 71 Guestville Ave.
- Friday, Feb. 6, 11 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., Weston Park Baptist Church, 1871 Weston Rd.
- Monday, Feb. 9, 11 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., Direct Energy Centre, Salon 110, 100 Princes' Blvd.