

How many competitors do you have

West-enders feel railroaded by Metrolinx air-rail diesels

By MIKE SULLIVAN

Last Updated: 15th October 2009, 5:05am

It got lonely in Weston. We had been struggling to make sense of plans for a diesel service to the airport for four long years.

When Metrolinx announced in late 2008 it was taking over the carriage of the environmental assessment for the air-rail link and was launching an assessment for a massive expansion of GO transit services, suddenly we had friends. Other neighbourhoods started to realize this would affect them, too.

The outrage spread. People who were suddenly subjected to ear-splitting pile driving by GO Transit told us of their fight.

We formed what is now known as the Clean Train Coalition. We were not opposed to the idea of public transit, but we wanted that transit to be clean. And we determined to work within the process to try to effect change in the plans by being reasonable and convincing.

QUELL THE OPPOSITION

That didn't work with Metrolinx. Their job was to build the project as they had designed it and to quell or diminish any opposition. It didn't matter how strong our arguments were, or how much support we had, they were proceeding to install 464 diesel trains through the hearts of our neighbourhoods.

We discovered many allies along the way. Doctors, environmentalists, professors, scientists, engineers, politicians of all stripes. All agreed with our basic tenet -- why build diesel when you can build electric? And why build it twice -- first diesel for 15 years, then electric?

We followed the process. We attended all the open houses. We waited for promised public meetings which never appeared. We sent in comments during the short time allotted. We dutifully filed our comments on the 1,700 page Environmental Project Report. We filed page after page of objections to the environment minister. We pointed out errors, inconsistencies and downright untruths in the report.

We watched in wonder as Metrolinx sent out hundreds of thousands of leaflets to the public advising them their health would not be harmed, long after the deadline had passed for public comment. We complained to the ombudsman about the misuse of public funds.

'CLEAN DIESEL'

The environment minister declared the issue a matter of provincial importance, which allows him to set conditions. But then the conditions don't seem to make sense. He said all the trains had to be so-called "clean diesel" Tier 4 trains (when available). It's true Tier 4 is much cleaner, but why buy trains twice? But then he said only one-third of the GO trains need to be Tier 4 (and all of air-rail link trains).

And again it makes no financial sense. GO Transit has just ordered and paid for many Tier 2 trains. They now have to replace those with Tier 4. And in a few years, if they are to be believed, they will replace those with electric.

And the minister has stated it's too expensive to run electric trains. This flies in the face of all the data out there. Electric trains pay for themselves in 10 years, according to Metrolinx's own documents. Jurisdictions the world over are taking out diesel in favour of electric.

So we press on. A federal Environmental Assessment is continuing. Metrolinx can't build until that's finished. And there's the study of electrification which should, we believe, recommend this line be electrified immediately. We'll make it an issue in the mayoralty campaign. We'll make it an issue in the provincial election. We'll make it an issue in the federal election. If Metrolinx can do this to our communities, no one is safe.

We keep on fighting.

-- Sullivan is co-chair of the Clean Train Coalition

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