

Westoners want brakes put on link to Pearson BLUE22 RAIL LINE

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TORONTO - A conversation with Mike Sullivan in the heart of the old town of Weston is drowned out twice in the space of a half hour, once by a GO train and the second time as a result of a lumbering freight train passing through the community in northwest Toronto.

But if the proposed privately run rail link from Union Station to Pearson International Airport becomes a reality, any future conversation with the head of the Weston Community Coalition will be punctuated by high-speed diesel train interruptions -- eight times per hour, 19 hours per day, seven days a week.

The project, known as Blue22 for the 22-minute-long trip, was first announced by then-federal transport minister David Collenette in the spring of 2003. It was described as a "premium" rail service aimed at business people and tourists, similar to the Heathrow Express in London, and would cost an estimated \$20 for a one-way ticket. In the fall of 2003, SNC-Lavalin was announced as the winning candidate to operate Blue22.

"At least in London, there is a subway [to the airport] for us poor people," said Mr. Sullivan, who has led the fight in Weston against the project.

More than four years after the announcement by Mr. Collenette, the fate of Blue22 is still unclear.

A report outlining the terms of reference for an environmental assessment was presented to provincial Environment Minister Laurel Broten last October.

Eight months later, she has not responded to the report, resulting in delays for both Blue22 and a much-needed expansion of the GO Transit line from Union Station to Georgetown.

A Transport Canada spokeswoman said it remains committed to the project.

The Greater Toronto Airports Authority, which would receive a fee of \$1.20 per passenger according to a 2003 agreement, is also in favour of the high-speed link.

"We would like to see it go ahead. We have the infrastructure in place to accept the train," said GTAA spokesman Scott Armstrong.

But Toronto Mayor David Miller has indicated his opposition to a high-speed link that does not stop in Weston en route to the airport. City Councillor Adam Giambrone, who is also chairman of the Toronto Transit Commission, said in an interview with the National Post that he is opposed to the Blue22 project. (The TTC expansion proposal announced this spring promises a dedicated streetcar line on Eglinton Avenue West that would eventually result in a low-cost, if not high-speed, link to Pearson.)

Late last week, Mr. Sullivan received a letter that said "a rail that is not high speed and that serves the community is our preference," from provincial Transportation Minister Donna Cansfield.

The comments appeared to be a sudden change from a letter he had received three weeks earlier from Ms. Cansfield. She took no position on the high-speed rail project then, but assured Mr. Sullivan that the concerns of the Weston community would be heard during the environmental assessment process.

"This is a hot potato," said Paul Ferreira, who won a byelection for the NDP this year in York South-Weston in a close race with the Liberals.

"It is publicly subsidized, private transit. It is poor public policy," said Mr. Ferreira, who has been outspoken in his criticism of Blue22.

The NDP politician has also called for the environmental assessment of the airport link to be "unbundled" from a process that has joined it to the GO Transit upgrades, so that the planned commuter improvements can begin more quickly.

The opposition in Weston is not a case of "not in my backyard," insisted Mr. Sullivan. "We know we live near a rail corridor. We are saying, 'Do it right.' "

Any airport link should stop at the GO station in Weston, preserve road access between the business core and the residential section east of the railway tracks and be more environmentally friendly than the diesel cars of Blue 22, Mr. Sullivan said.

"An electric train with 10 or 12 stops and a reasonable price would be packed all the time," he said.

He suggested this type of project could transport people from Union Station to Pearson in fewer than 35 minutes.

The necessary upgrades to the Georgetown south rail corridor will cost about \$300-million and the federal, provincial and municipal governments have already agreed to cover the expense, Mr. Sullivan said. SNC-Lavalin would be responsible for constructing a short rail spur connecting the line to Pearson.

Imants Hausmanis, corridor manager for the Georgetown upgrades and the lead GO Transit representative for the project, insisted that the upgrade is not a subsidy for SNC-Lavalin.

"It is a mistake to say that GO is building for Blue22," Mr. Hausmanis said. The upgrades are primarily aimed at expanding GO commuter capacity along the line, he said.

Mr. Sullivan countered that a previous study concluded GO needs only one additional track instead of the three tracks that will be constructed if Blue22 goes ahead.

The Weston community group is also opposed to a plan to build a nearly one-kilometre-long "depressed corridor" through the neighbourhood. The Blue22 trains would run below the ground with an eight-metre-high cement wall on either side of the tracks.

The "depressed corridor" would require closing one of the three road crossings north of Lawrence Avenue, between Weston Road and the rest of the community.

While this is an improvement over the original plan by Mr. Collenette to close all three road crossings, Mr. Sullivan said, it is still likely to hurt store owners along Weston Road. "Most of them are already on life support," he said.

He also questioned whether the cement walls will reduce the additional noise of the trains and if it is possible to dig that far down, with the Humber River nearby.

It is not known when Ms. Broten will provide a response to the terms of reference report. A spokeswoman for the Minister was unavailable for comment.

While he was pleased with the June 28 letter sent by the provincial Transportation Minister that expressed opposition to a high-speed link, Mr. Sullivan said he believes the provincial Liberals are stalling until after the provincial election this fall.

Meanwhile, he promised that the residents in Weston will continue to be watching closely. More than 600 people receive regular e-mail updates about the project. "People in Weston are engaged," he said.

Mr. Sullivan first inquired about the project in 2003, after seeing a public notice in the newspaper. "I've been asking questions ever since," he said.

CLOSE WINDOW

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