

Joliet Herald News

February 5, 2009

CN deal should be derailed

We applaud the recent news of the Illinois Commerce Commission opposing the EJ&E Railway acquisition by Canadian National Railway. As the most respected authority on rail issues in Illinois, the ICC clearly understands the direct negative impact the deal will have on hundreds of thousands of people. While some have decided to accept this transaction, Will County and the village of New Lenox remain vehemently opposed.

Our resistance to CN's \$300 million purchase of nearly 200 miles of track has everything to do with the incredibly negative environmental impact it may have on our residents. This issue can be spun in many ways to justify the acceptance of such an enormous change in our environment. Some say we don't have a legal leg to stand on, but the record of facts and legal proceedings say just the opposite.

Federal law requires an extensive, complete analysis of the environmental consequences resulting from the CN purchase of the EJ&E as well as the steps that can be taken to mitigate them. This analysis did not happen. Most deplorably, increased exposure of minority communities to toxic chemicals was masked or ignored.

Our review of the Surface Transportation Board decision reveals the environmental impact study made assumptions instead of conducting the requisite surveys, while meaningful mitigation of environmental consequences in Will County has yet to be properly explored.

As just one example, the STB admitted there would be adverse environmental consequences for the areas around the EJ&E tracks -- including Will County -- but concluded that they would be made up for in part by environmental benefits from the resulting reduction in rail traffic on CN's own lines -- in Chicago! Worse still, the STB further admitted that even this benefit to Chicagoans may be "short lived" if CN then reroutes other rail traffic through Chicago. We find these fairly obvious mistakes hard to ignore.

The CN plan will increase Will County's rail traffic by more than 400 percent and transport 700 percent more hazardous material through Will County.

There is also a lack of information on what level and type of hazardous materials will travel through our communities. This is not about money. There is no other way to spin this except that the environmental, human and health safety consequences of the CN plan will be enormous.

Like other communities, we did seek to negotiate these issues with CN because we feel strongly that CN has not negotiated in good faith with the communities of northeastern Illinois.

We believe it is inappropriate to let this transaction go forward in exchange for a few noise walls and some cameras at grade crossings.

Furthermore, the limited mitigation offered will be considered a drop in the bucket compared to what local communities, the state and federal governments will have to dole out to provide relief from this transaction. Some who criticize the county today for maintaining its opposition to the CN transaction will be the first to condemn our local governments if a hazardous material event causes irreparable harm to our community.

Recent events have confirmed these fears. On Jan. 17, a CN derailment in a northern suburb forced 5,000 frustrated and sometimes-angry Metra riders to find other ways to get to work.

More alarming, two of the cars that derailed were carrying molten sulfur, classified as a hazardous material.

From our perspective, the CN acquisition cannot be ignored until a credible environmental impact study is conducted and fully evaluated for Will County -- and adequate mitigation measures are identified and required.

If this acquisition is to occur, it should be done right, which includes following federal standards that protect the people of Will County.

We cannot and should not turn our backs on this beautiful county we call home, and we will fight to preserve its environment and the safety of our residents. That is our responsibility and the women, men and children of Will County should expect nothing less.

Larry Walsh is Will County executive. Jim Moustis is Will County Board chairman. Tim Baldermann is mayor of New Lenox.