

Neighbour not told about new CN rail yard

Fears impact on nearby pond, wildlife

By Hanneke Brooymans, Edmonton Journal July 5, 2010



John Kristensen found out about the rail yard after construction began.

Photograph by: John Lucas, edmontonjournal.com

STRATHCONA COUNTY - John Kristensen is faced with a problem that has its roots in the foundations of the creation of this country.

For almost 100 years, CN has had title to a small patch of land next to the railway that runs close to his home just southeast of Edmonton. For decades, the spot was quiet. But in late June, Cando Contracting Ltd. brought in a backhoe and some trucks. It started tearing up the ground in preparation for a rail car storage yard.

Kristensen, who calculates he lives 163 metres from the yard, was not informed about the project. He found out by accident when asked if he would have any extra soil to sell for infill.

Cando didn't need to tell him what was planned because the project is governed by federal law. The Canadian Transportation Agency says no approval is needed to construct a railway line within the right-of-way of an existing line.

Kristensen thinks it's ridiculous that laws from the 1800s are at play.

He checked to see if the province or Strathcona County could do anything about it, but discovered they had little or no jurisdiction over the project.

Don Barr, Cando's director of operations, said the company is building a 914-metre-long siding. Off of the siding will be 10 storage tracks that could hold up to 225 cars. The yard will store empty petroleum cars belonging to Imperial Oil.

Alberta Environment reviewed the project, but decided it didn't need to get involved because the tank cars would be empty, no wetlands would be destroyed to build the yard, and run-off rates were not likely to increase, said Jessica Potter, a ministry spokeswoman.

Barr, a former CN locomotive engineer, said the project will sit on two hectares of land owned by CN.

Normally, a railway company using a line has a right-of-way that extends about 30 metres out from each side of the track, he said. But every 12 to 16 kilometres a small plot of land beside the track, about three to 10 hectares, was designated as station grounds. "It was at these station grounds that towns, for the most part, sprang up in the Prairies," Barr said. "And so they put in elevator tracks and things like that on the station grounds."

Barr said the site did have a grain elevator on it until it was torn down in 1953.

Now, he's leasing the land from CN for up to 15 years.

Kristensen said that while grain elevators were built to benefit people in the surrounding area, that won't be the case with the rail yard.

He thinks the shunting and coupling and uncoupling of the cars will be noisy. He is worried about air pollution, pointing to a 2007 study that found diesel exhaust from a rail yard was about 5.5 times richer in the most carcinogenic components than the exhaust from diesel trucks.

But he expressed more concern about nearby Bretona Pond, which his home overlooks. Kristensen said his wife's family has lived near the pond for five generations. The pond has interpretive facilities established jointly by the provincial and Strathcona County governments.

Kristensen was assistant deputy minister of Alberta Parks before he retired three years ago. In 1987, he and his wife joined the county's ConservAction initiative by entering 40 hectares of land they own across the road from their home into a conservation agreement.

Kristensen has allowed much of the pasture to become woodlot. Together, the pond and conservation area have attracted 182 bird species and many birdwatchers.

Kristensen is worried that there will be leaks and spills at the rail yard. The drainage pattern in the area leads to the pond, to the conservation area and to Mill Creek ravine, he said.

But Barr said the cars will be inspected before they are brought to the yard. "If they're dripping or anything like that, our agreement is that we will not take them to that location. And that's an agreement we have in writing with Imperial Oil."

Although highways are located next to the Bretona area, the cacophony of bird song shows the pond and the woods are attracting wildlife.

Strathcona County Coun. Alan Dunn called the rail yard project an "abomination.

"In terms of the surrounding topography and the environmental impacts and the impacts on people who have lived there for generations, it's just horrible," he said.

"It's an industrial yard, basically, which is being inserted in the middle of a country-residential and large-residential and agricultural area without any consideration of the surrounding area whatsoever.

"If this were county land, any application like this would probably be rejected out of hand because it does not meet the requirements for our municipal development plan."

Barr said he searched for an appropriate site and the one chosen was the first station grounds site that was available close to the Imperial site. "As you might imagine, it's very difficult to put a rail use facility in somewhere that's designated for another purpose."

Imperial Oil spokesman Jon Harding would not say why the company needs to find a new storage yard or where their cars are currently stored.

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