

## Lac-Mégantic mayor lobbies U.S. on rail safety

### Lawmakers urged to improve dangerous-cargo regulations

William Marsden, Postmedia News Edmonton Journal  
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Eight months after a runaway train carrying highly flammable and toxic crude oil brought disaster to the tiny rural Quebec community of Lac-Mégantic, the town's diminutive leader has come to the world's most powerful capital, not for sympathy, but for action.

Colette Roy-Laroche, the unflappable and determined mayor of Lac-Mégantic, joined a coalition of mayors and city representatives from Quebec, New Brunswick, Illinois and Maine on Monday to convince U.S. lawmakers and regulators of the urgent need to improve safety measures for the transportation of dangerous materials by rail.

Their first meeting was with senior members of the U.S. Department of Transportation who are in charge of rail safety - some of whom had visited Lac-Mégantic since July 7 last year when the train exploded and killed 47 people, incinerated the downtown and contaminated the entire area.

Roy-Laroche said after the private meeting that it wasn't necessary to relate to the U.S. officials what had happened to her town of 6,000 people. They already knew. In any case, she said, words can't fully describe the destruction and suffering the accident caused.

"In my opinion, they were very attentive and understood our desire for better train safety," she said after the meeting. "But we want more than their understanding. We want progress on safety that is harmonized on both sides of the border and throughout the system."

She said the mayors are demanding quick action on integrating regulations that assure the safety of the train cars, force the train companies to inform municipalities of the contents, danger and toxicity of the materials they transport through their communities and assure that the trains are maintained and operated safely.

The train that destroyed Lac-Mégantic was hauling a light, sweet crude from the Bakken oilfields in the Dakotas to New Brunswick. It had crossed the border three times before arriving in Lac-Mégantic. It had but one engineer, who had left the train unmanned while he went to a motel to catch some sleep. The Transportation Safety Board of Canada discovered that the crude oil had been wrongly classified as the least dangerous when in fact it was the most.

Oil transportation by rail is rising at a tremendous rate. It has increased to about 400,000 carloads in 2013, from a mere 9,500 in 2008. Transporters scramble to assemble enough tank cars to meet the mounting demands of oil companies and most of the cars do not conform to the latest safety standards. The Association of American Railroads says that of the 335,000 tank cars in active service only 18,000 are built to the latest industry safety standards.

Roy-Laroche said she and her colleagues left the meeting with the impression that the U.S. officials, as with those in Canada, are eager to take action. But she complained that the process is too slow.

"I think that there is a desire to tighten up the rules, but I also understand that making stronger regulations can be a long process," she said.

Both Canada and the United States have begun the process of rewriting the regulations and have imposed some new requirements that force companies to test the oil before it is shipped so it can be properly classified. But standards regarding the safety of cars, maintenance, manning and reporting are still largely left to the companies to work out among themselves.

Meanwhile, the residents of Lac-Mégantic are struggling to repair their lives and their city, which has quite literally been sliced in two by the tragedy.

"Many people are still traumatized, I would even say depressed," she said. "On the economic level, it's a situation where we are beginning to improve either by relocating businesses, professional services, which were destroyed in the centre of town. On the environmental level, it was the biggest catastrophe. The area has to be decontaminated. All the dirt has to be taken out and replaced with clean soil. ... It won't be finished until 2015 when we can begin to reconstruct this really important part of our city. The people are still mourning."

The cost of the cleanup and reconstruction is estimated at \$1.5 to \$2 billion. So far, Quebec and Ottawa are paying the bills.