

Letter: Freight trains in Point-St-Charles and St-Henri

THE GAZETTE AUGUST 22, 2013

Re: "[Municipalities seek disclosure](#)" (Gazette, Aug. 20)

The timely article makes the same point about the transportation of hazardous goods by rail that community groups, not only in Point-St-Charles and St-Henri, but all over Canada have been making for many years. And, quite evidently, all their protests have been without any success.

The article mentions the Sept. 24, 2011, derailment of six cars of a 91-car train travelling on one of the many tracks located high on the embankment that dissects Point-St-Charles. Hearing on the radio that six cars were teetering on the embankment, then seeing from my window the feverish coming and goings of CN repair crews, and not knowing what was in those derailed cars, made the recent CN media statements that there was nothing to worry about and that supplying first responders a detailed list of tanker and freight car contents would be a hassle seem otherworldly, not to say third-worldly.

However, the article fails however to observe the elephant in the room. The elevated tracks in Point-St-Charles form one of the busiest railway corridors in Canada; the scandal is that they are, in addition, used around the clock as a full-fledged shunting yard. With longer and longer trains being shunted at the former Grant Trunk railway yards to the east, over the years this noisy process is more and more spilling over from the yard onto the tracks traversing the middle of the Point. As a result, many of us no longer live next door to a shunting yard: we are the shunting yard. Trains transporting who knows what are shunted back and forth by sometimes as many as three smoke-belching diesel engines, day and night, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year; open windows or the use of the yard are out of the question — just getting a breath of fresh air is often a chore. Imagine living in Dorval, having planes that land roaring back up into the sky and land again, over and over, madly banging into other planes on the way up and down. Or imagine living next door to a plant manufacturing heavy trucks and having the assembly line down the middle of your main street.

The Lac-Mégantic disaster has received enormous coverage in the press, and for good reason; Canada's railways were incorporated before Confederation, and the colonial mentality that reigned at that time has persisted in the railway sphere: imperiousness, disregard for collateral damage inflicted by their actions, lack of transparency — the list goes on. The time for a complete overhaul of the self-serving railway legislation is long overdue.

Making the contents of freight and tanker cars known to civic authorities should be no problem in this age of instant communication. (Though electronic communication has not really trickled down to the shunting community yet: like in the good old pre-Confederation days, noisy brass bells are still used to communicate a reversal of direction of the train to the shunting crews, and, in the process, to hundreds of hapless neighbours, around the clock!)

Even with perfect security measures, living next to the railway tracks will expose any neighbourhood to a remote chance of a cataclysm, the way everyone has to live with the chance of an airplane falling out of the sky. One can live with that. The real problem in our neighbourhood is the daily certainty of having to live with air polluted by poisonous fumes, the ear-shattering noise of shunting and the greatly increased chance of an accident.

There is no lack of space in Canada to locate shunting activity away from human habitation — it's a lack of will by authorities and what appears to be an ingrained attitude of "being above the law" on the part of the Canadian National Railway Company.

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