

Crumbling subway is 'sound:' CN

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Railway has no plans to spruce up downtown landmark

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Moncton's downtown subway railroad bridge might not be pretty, but it's certainly safe, its owners insist.

"We can assure you that it is structurally sound," Julie Senécal, spokeswoman for Canadian National Railway, said yesterday.

Some Metro Moncton residents wonder about that, after a chunk of concrete the size of a toaster oven fell off the structure during Friday's suppertime rush hour.

No one was struck and no vehicles were damaged when the concrete fell from the centre supports of the bridge and landed between the lanes of traffic, but some residents look at the structure, pockmarked with missing pieces of cement, riddled with cracks and streaked with stains from water seeping out of it, and wonder when, not if, someone passing under the bridge won't be so lucky.

If the bridge was to deteriorate that badly, Senécal said, the situation would likely be anticipated during routine inspections of the bridge and the situation would be fixed before anyone comes to harm.

CN undertakes a major inspection of the bridge every spring, the last one being last May, but that doesn't placate some worried motorists and pedestrians who wonder why the loose concrete that fell on Friday wasn't spotted and fixed during that inspection.

As well, the structure gets a once-over from time to time when CN officials do routine maintenance on the tracks above the bridge, perform their twice-weekly track inspections, or perform other work on the area surrounding the structure, Senécal explained.

When loose concrete or serious cracks appear, any concrete in danger of falling is actually removed, before it can do anyone any harm, she explained. That's likely why there are missing pieces of concrete all over the underside of the structure this morning - over time, CN crews have removed pieces that might be in danger of falling, she said. At least some of those missing pieces that can be seen today on the bridge were removed after Friday's incident which resulted in the temporary closure of that section of Main Street and a thorough inspection, she explained.

The Main Street subway is rarely pretty. The structure is made of steel and is clad in concrete which takes a pounding each time a big freight train travels over it.

As well, tractor trailers used to smash into the bridge several times per year when their drivers would misjudge the height of their rigs and of the bridge, though that's somewhat of a rarity now that signage was greatly improved warning truckers not to try to drive under the bridge.

A little more than a decade ago, the subway was thoroughly cleaned and patched but gradually time and wear took their toll and now the bridge is back to its more familiar state - cracked, streaked, pitted and splashed with paint from tagging, which is a form of graffiti based on symbols and odd markings that is generally frowned upon as being akin to litter.

About the only eye-pleasing aspect of the bridge today is the work of a stencil-wielding, paint-toting artist who recently adorned its walls with colourful butterflies, with the logo Be My Butterfly scripted on the northeast pedestrian entrance.

Downtown merchants' group Downtown Moncton Centreville Inc. has been toying with the idea of bringing back the Subway Paint-Ins of the late 1970s, in which community groups got together to paint colourful murals on the big panels that stand barren on the support structures under the bridge.

CN is intrigued by that idea, but isn't certain at this point if they'd agree to allow their bridge to be used as an artistic canvas.

"We'd have to evaluate that," Senécal said.

It's critical that bridge inspectors are able to closely examine the bridge, including its blemishes, in order to properly evaluate its integrity, she explained.

"It's extremely important for us to be able to see the structure very well," she said.

CN evaluates such requests "on a case-by-case basis," she said.

"We'd look into it and see if there's anything we can do."

In the meantime, CN has no plans for any work on the bridge, though that can change should the situation warrant it, Senécal said.

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