



Citizens Acting for Rail Safety

MEDIA ALERT

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Minneapolis City Council Transportation and Public Works Committee Passes Freight Rail Safety Resolution

Citizens Acting for Rail Safety - Twin Cities (CARS-TC) commends the Minneapolis City Council Transportation and Public Works (TPW) Committee for passing a freight rail safety resolution today. Given recent ethanol and oil train derailments in Alma and Watertown, WI on November 7 and 8, 2015, this action by the City is especially timely and important.

The city-wide resolution urges enhanced safety requirements from state and federal governments and the implementation of such by the railroads to reduce the risk from trains carrying crude oil, ethanol and other hazardous materials to those living and working in Minneapolis. Among numerous requests, the resolution asks the federal government to approve a feasibility study for the reroute of freight trains away from populated areas. The Council is pushing for better communication protocols between railroads and local emergency responders and is also asking for mandated insurance liability requirements. Most railroads, if they carry insurance at all, only insure their trains, rolling stock and rail infrastructure and have no coverage for potential damage to surrounding communities and ecosystems.

The Minneapolis City Council resolution also includes asking railroads to share information regarding the condition of existing infrastructure and expansion plans. Earlier this fall, without notice to adjacent property owners, the BNSF expanded its tracks in a Northeast Minneapolis neighborhood. The result was the leveling of a thick tree buffer and the tearing down of structures in people's backyards. BNSF claims that they (BNSF) own the right of way, which is currently in dispute.

The City of Minneapolis Freight Rail Safety Resolution advances on the same day Governor Dayton and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) are demanding revised oil train disaster prevention and response plans from five railroads since their earlier submissions were not fully compliant with state requirements. The United States Environmental Protection Agency has given Minnesota the power to regulate in this arena. However the railroads have a history of noncompliance with state law. Another recent example of the railroad industry's disregard of pertinent regulations is their failure to install the federally mandated positive train control (PTC) braking system. PTC automatically slows trains when speed thresholds are exceeded or when approaching a track impediment too quickly. In spite of the existence of positive train control since the mid 1980s, and a five year timeline to implement the PTC mandate, the railroads recently threatened to cease service unless given an extension to the December 31, 2015 deadline. In response to this railroad industry non-compliance and threat, the federal government granted a three-year extension on the mandated PTC installation.

City Council member Kevin Reich, chair of the TPW committee said, "These issues aren't abstractions. The problem of hazardous freight is not new but what is new is the volume of this activity and the nature of the stuff moving through. The best way to move forward is to move forward as partners and co-problem solvers with the rail companies. This is an invitation for sincere peer to peer conversations."

Council member Linea Palmisano said, "this role is shared across different levels of government. Planning mitigates risk and helps us to be more resilient. That is the role we play at the city level. Enhanced communication (with railroads) is greatly needed. This isn't just a Minneapolis issue."

CARS member Gayle Bonneville emphasized, “this is not about pitting communities against one another. Instead, this resolution is an opportunity to collaborate to improve conditions for all. Unless and until we can make progress on increasing freight rail safety and ensure that transparency by railroad corporations is a reality, we need a moratorium on the transport of hazardous materials via rail.”

CARS praises the Minneapolis City Council TPW committee for introducing a resolution that both seeks to strengthen federal and state laws and makes the reasonable expectation that railroads comply with these laws and regulations. The resolution will go before the full council on November 20, and the committee expects that it will pass. “We are working toward a similar resolution for St. Paul and other Minnesota towns and cities,” said CARS member Cathy Velasquez Eberhart. Communities are best served when a resolution such as this is treated as a dynamic document that is revisited and strengthened on a regular basis and as conditions change.

About CARS, Citizens Acting for Rail Safety

CARS, Citizens Acting for Rail Safety is a group of Minnesota and Wisconsin residents working with the public and legislators toward improved freight rail transportation systems that respect the health, safety, and quality of life of citizens and the environment. In addition to this group in the Twin Cities, there are chapters in La Crosse, Watertown, and Milwaukee, WI.

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