

Are noisy CN/EJ&E trains derailing lives?

(The following story by Amy Lee appeared on the Southtown Star website on October 13, 2009.)

CHICAGO — An influx of nighttime train traffic on the old Elgin, Joliet and Eastern Railway Co. tracks has Ken Kemp questioning his sanity.

"We're all going crazy. It startles you to death," said Kemp, 61, an electrical contractor who has lived in his Park Forest home since 1992. "It sounds like someone's slamming two cast iron pans together right by your ear at 2 in the morning. Ever since they got this line, it's gotten a lot worse."

IDOT objections

The Illinois Department of Transportation in September filed a petition with the federal Surface Transportation Board to reopen the sale of the EJ&E rail line to the Canadian National Railway Co. IDOT says the EJ&E/CN sale agreement does not allow the state agency enough time to begin construction on required grade separations at Ogden Avenue in Aurora and Lincoln Highway in Lynwood. The agreement called for IDOT to begin that work by 2015, and IDOT is seeking an extension.

Kemp and thousands of other Southland residents who live near 198 miles of old EJ&E track must cope with a new schedule of freight train travel as the Canadian National Railway Co. shifts operations onto the tracks. The giant CN rail operation bought the EJ&E lines in December 2008 for \$300 million in a move designed to relieve congestion on CN's five Chicago rail lines.

The company has transferred four trains onto EJ&E tracks, or just about 20 percent of the trains it hopes will traverse the suburban tracks within three years, according to CN spokesman Patrick Waldron. Up to 24 new trains will travel the EJ&E lines when CN's congestion-reduction plan is in place, he said.

"We've said all along there will be a three-year implementation process to integrate EJ&E and we're still in the first year of that process," Waldron said. "There's also about \$100 million in upgrades that need to be completed as part of the implementation over a three-year process. We're moving forward."

Much opposition

Residents and community leaders alike in the summer of 2008 presented a groundswell of opposition to the sale, with critics bemoaning increases in rail traffic and noise, and citing concerns over environmental and safety issues. Communities along the line, which runs through Chicago Heights, Park Forest, Matteson, Frankfort and New Lenox, held dozens of public meetings and opponents filed two lawsuits to stop the sale. One filed by The Regional Answer to Canadian National, or TRAC, lingers in federal court; the other was dismissed.

TRAC hopes to convince the Surface Transportation Board, the arm of the U.S. Department of Transportation that handles rail-related issues, to reconsider the sale because of safety concerns. There are no court dates set for that case, according to an STB spokesman.

'I wake up every time'

Regardless, residents who live along the old EJ&E tracks say the sale to CN has already brought an increase in night trains, which by law must repetitively blast their horns when crossing surface streets.

"They say you get used to it, but I don't get used to it," said Dan Turner, 35, whose backyard overlooks the tracks in Frankfort. "I wake up every time. It's a pain."

Residents who live along the tracks lament the increased traffic and try to prepare for life when all 24 new trains run each day on the old EJ&E tracks.

"They're doing it slowly, like under the radar, so we don't really notice it," said Carl DeButch, 43, a flooring contractor who bought his Frankfort home in 2005. "I can tell a big difference now, and they're nowhere near having all their trains on that track. We wouldn't have bought here if we'd known, but there's nothing you can do to stop it."