

Draft Complaint to Canadian Transportation Agency

Re: Burrard Inlet Line in Vancouver

We are writing to complain about noise, pollution, and safety issues related to the Burrard Inlet Line (BI Line) in Vancouver, BC. The BI Line is a 1 km track that connects the Port of Vancouver to the False Creek railyard to the south. It is used mostly by CN Rail for freight transport.

We are residents of Vancouver's Strathcona neighbourhood, through which the BI Line passes. We support rail transport and recognize its importance to the economy, however we expect it to be done with sensitivity towards local environments and human health.

We are aware that a noise complaint to the CTA was made last year by a group of residents from a section of railway known as the Grandview Cut. The Grandview Cut is also used by CN trains. We are a separate group in a neighbourhood several kilometres away. None of us participated in the Grandview Cut complaint or dispute resolution process.

History and Neighbourhood Context

Strathcona is Vancouver's oldest residential neighbourhood, with many houses that have been here for over a century. For many years prior to 2017, usage of the BI Line consisted almost entirely of the West Coast Express train, which makes two trips per day. These trains run quietly and during the daytime, and residents have never complained about them.

Around January 2017, CN dramatically increased freight train travel along the BI Line without any discussion with the community. CN redirected its shunting operations from tracks located along Burrard Inlet, outside of residential area, to the BI Line. The BI Line is now CN's primary shunting track for Centerm Port, with at least six freight trains per day running along the BI Line. These shunting operations are ongoing 24/7.

Train Proximity to Residences

As shown in the photo below, CN freight trains travel extremely close to homes. The yellow house shown in this photo is over 115 years old and the trains pass within five feet of a toddler's bedroom. There are no noise barriers between the train tracks and any buildings along the BI line.



Approximately 1,200 residents live in the Stamps Place social housing complex right across the road from the tracks. Hundreds more live in other buildings within one block of the tracks.

There are some light industrial and retail buildings next to the BI Line, however both sides of the BI Line are zoned as residential. Two major developments, planned and approved long before the increase in rail traffic, are under construction. Strathcona Village, a new condo development with 280 units, located within 10 meters of the BI Line, is sold out and will begin occupancy soon. The Villa Cathay nursing home is currently constructing a ten story residential tower located less than 30 meters from the BI Line at Union Street In the photo below you can see the railway tracks, and just behind them the crane that's building the new tower of the nursing home.



Level Crossings

There are six level crossings of the BI Line. The BI Line crosses two significant streets at grade level:

- Venables Street, which connects to Prior Street further west, is an arterial street and major bus route.
- Union Street is part of the most heavily used bicycle route in the city

Shunting trains stop traffic at these crossings for up to 20 minutes at a time, without providing enough advance warning for drivers to take alternate routes on other major streets. When a train blocks Venables Street, buses must make a wide detour around it, leaving a 1.5 km section of Venables/Prior Street without bus service.

The City of Vancouver is currently debating where to locate an arterial overpass that would eliminate that at grade crossing at Prior/Venables. The decision process, design, financing and construction of this overpass will take years to complete.

Noise Issues

There are often several freight trains passing through the BI Line during the night, and they often make very loud shunting noises. We regularly hear shunting between 12 AM and 4 AM, for many minutes at a time.

Train whistles/horns disturb residents up to several blocks away. Residents who live near the BI Line are harmed by noise from trains, especially at night. Nighttime noise in particular is disturbing sleep and causing health to suffer. Vehicles frequently cut through side streets to get around trains, adding further to noise and pollution in the neighbourhood.

Here are some quotes from affected residents:

“I can't sleep because when I am beginning to do so a new train come again and again and again. ...Every morning I wake up with headache and unable to coordinate my movements and my thinking, with bad humor. ...I think that I am getting sick.”

“It really makes it difficult to have a good night sleep with the increased train traffic during these times. CN needs to take into consideration the people who live next to the train tracks.”

“Do you know how hard it is to keep a baby sleeping next to a train engine in the middle of the night when it is summertime and the windows need to be open?”

“In the spring our neighbours in AwesomeTown lost their personal battle with being able to cope with the night train noise and subsequently sold and moved. They had only owned their unit for about a year, so had to pay major penalties to break the conditions of their mortgage. In short, the couple had not had a full night's sleep since the beginning of the increased train traffic in January. Instead of getting better and more used to it, as the year went on and the season got hotter, the need to sleep with windows open came which meant even increased noise (and less coping).”

Here is a 20-second audio clip what the shunting sounds like inside a house with all doors and windows closed. The “normal” noise of the moving train, when it is not shunting, is the background sound on this clip :

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0Cikf24AzLzU3oxZ1ZwVFFqdnc/view?usp=sharing>

We understand that part of the CTA's investigation process is to ask the municipality whether residents have complained about noise. Please note that prior to November 17, 2017, the City of Vancouver's usual practice was to not document complaints about train noise. Residents who called the City of Vancouver's 3-1-1 line regarding train noise were told that it was not a municipal issue, and no systematic records of the complaints were kept.

Air Pollution Issues

Residents are disturbed by air pollution from diesel locomotive engines and by increased motor vehicle traffic. One resident wrote to CN, "We cannot enjoy our patio anymore because the noise and smells from the train fumes and then cars trying to bypass the traffic obstruction makes it disgusting to eat outside."

We are aware of the evidence coming out of North American cities like Chicago that point to diesel locomotive engines as a significant source of air pollution, nitrogen oxides and diesel particulate matter, and their direct link to public health in the form of low birth weights, premature death, cancers, asthma, and respiratory diseases.

Safety Issues

Many Strathcona residents have noted the following safety concerns:

Train Accidents

There are no protections around this section of the line that would prevent a derailed train from smashing into adjacent housing. Any kind of spill or fire on the line carries an extreme likelihood of causing injury or death to a number of local residents.

Routing hundreds of containers of potentially hazardous content through a densely populated neighbourhood raises the potential damage caused by a derailment, spill or crash. A chemical spill in the Centerm Port in May 2015 took 24 hours to contain. Centerm is planning to increase its capacity by 75%. Its emergency response plan is isolated to the facility itself and does not cover an emergency incident in the difficult-to-access, densely populated BI Line.

Motor Vehicle Traffic Safety

Drivers that are stopped by trains at Venables/Prior Street go through residential streets (Campbell and Glen) to get to the Hastings Street overpass. The shortcutting drivers pass directly in front of buildings that are used heavily by children: Admiral Seymour Elementary school, the Raycam Community Centre, and Stamps Place social housing.

Pedestrians on Railway Tracks

There are many open, unfenced areas along the BI Line that pedestrians use to enter the railway. Chain link fences that have been installed along the track are regularly cut (in one location to provide an escape route for sex trade workers). In summer, it is not uncommon for residents to see people having sex on the trackbed. The large homeless population in the area regularly uses spaces adjoining the tracks to camp.

Emergency Vehicle Access

Emergency vehicles can be stopped by passing trains for up to 20 minutes at a time, which raises the concern that people in Strathcona might not receive prompt help in emergencies.

Desired Outcomes

Strathcona residents accept the need for trains to move through our neighbourhood as long as it is done safely, and without unreasonable disturbance to the people who live, work, and visit here. We strongly oppose the current practice of using the BI Line as a 24/7 freight train assembly yard.

We seek the following outcomes for the BI Line:

1. That, as required by federal regulations, trains not block ground crossings for more than five minutes a time, unless the train is continuously moving in one direction.
2. That given the extreme vulnerability of residences near the tracks, the risks of derailment, fire, and hazardous material release be minimized:
 - a. That activities associated with a higher risk of derailment, such as shunting or train assembly and disassembly, be eliminated.
 - b. That the current speed limit of 10 km/hr remain in place.
 - c. That hazardous materials not be transported.
3. That loud noises from trains, such as shunting, horns, and whistles, be eliminated between 8 PM and 7:30 AM
4. That trains used on the BI Line between 8 PM and 7:30 AM not use noisy engines
5. That train locomotives use minimally-air-polluting technology. Policies to consider cleaner fuels in urban areas, emission reductions by way of diesel particulate filters, and directives around engine idling would mitigate some of the health concerns in particular for the families and seniors living within metres of the line.
6. That air quality and noise levels near the BI line be regularly monitored, with standards enforced for air quality and noise.
7. That CN work with the City of Vancouver to minimize motor vehicle shortcutting through Strathcona
8. That CN work with the City of Vancouver, other governments, and the Strathcona community to develop a formal emergency management plan for the BI Line. The plan should ensure prompt response, including access for all types of emergency vehicles, in all parts of Strathcona whether or not crossings are blocked by trains or by permanent closures. The plan should address response in cases of a train-related spill, fire, or derailment, in addition to non-train-related emergencies.
9. That the level of allowable usage for the BI Line be reviewed, taking into consideration all effects on the current neighbourhood population and anticipated future population.