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Goodbye to 'Ba-boom, ba- boom, ba- boom'?

Canadian National Railroad
looks longingly toward the
suburbs

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Editor

On a recent evening, two west-bound Canadian National locomotives, with dozens of freight cars and tankers lined up behind them, sat idling on the St. Charles Airline, a .7-mile stretch of railroad track between Michigan to the east and the Chicago River on the west that parallels 15th Street. A low white noise, punctuated by bursts of steam, enveloped the area around the trains.

After about half an hour, one of the locomotives came to life. Its hum grew slightly louder, as if something wound up was finally being released. There were two short blasts, and then the train lurched forward. Occasional screeches of metal wheels gripping metal tracks broke the familiar rhythm of a train on the move.

Idling trains are common sight on the tracks, said residents of condos and town homes close to them. The train must wait for clearance to cross Metra's Rock Island line to the west of Clark. Donald Jarubek, president of the association at 61 W. 15th, a condominium building to the north of the St. Charles line, said the freight traffic does "affect our quality of life."

"That freight train sits there with its engine running for hours on end," he said. "Either direction it



Two Canadian National trains idle on the St. Charles Airline near Dearborn Tower (left).

Photos by MICAH MAIDENBERG/Staff



The intersection of the St. Charles Airline and Metra's Rock Island Line.

has to cross the Metra Rock Island track. So they sit there and wait for clearance for hours on end, blowing smoke and diesel fumes."

If Canadian National gets its way, the days of its locomotives sitting in the South Loop would soon end. Last fall, company announced it wanted to purchase the Elgin, Joliet and Eastern Railroad. The EJ and E route forms a semi-circle around Chicago from Gary, IN., to Waukegan, passing through many suburbs. Canadian National would shift the entirety of its freight traffic onto it, saying the route would allow it to move freight faster and more efficiently.

Currently, the St. Charles Airline is a key spur for Canadian National, a Montreal-based shipper and majority owner of the track (other freight haulers use the track, as does Amtrak). Company spokesman Jim Kvedaras said the St. Charles Airline connects the company's northwest and west lines with ones that go south and southeast, and as many as six trains with an average length of 7,500 feet pass along the route each day.

While much of the controversy generated by the proposal has come from suburban communities adamantly opposed to increased freight traffic passing through their areas, Canadian National's move would come as a relief to some South Loop residents who live in the buildings that loom over the St. Charles line. Besides the stationary trains, residents complained about the noise and vibration the trains produced.

Peter Pagano, president of the condo association at 1529 S. State, a high-rise building, said he is bothered by noise from passing freight trains even on his 15th floor apartment, which faces south. "There's a **ba-boom, ba-boom, ba-boom**," he said.

"You can feel the vibration-it's that bad. It's not shaking stuff on the wall but you can feel the vibration," Pagano explained. "The worst time ... is if you're sleeping at night during the summertime and you want windows open for fresh air and you hear the thumping and hear the screeching of the wheels."

Kyutaek Han, a resident of a town house near Clark to the immediate north of the tracks, said noise from the train "shocked" his family after they moved into their place a little less than four years ago.

"It's not only the train noise when they're passing by, but when they're standing there for hours," Han said.

Representatives from Daystar School and Old St. Mary's School, two religious educational institutions with building that abut the line, also support the move.

Canadian National would spend \$300 million to purchase the EJ and E line, according Kvedaras, but first needs approval from the Surface Transportation Board, the federal agency that regulates railroads. The board, comprised of three presidential appointees, is evaluating the purchase based on environmental impact and on economic and transportation considerations. An agency spokesperson said she did not know when the ruling could come. Canadian National is hoping for a decision by the end of 2008

The proposal has divided the state's federal delegation. Congressman Danny Davis (D-7), whose district includes the St. Charles Airline, supports the move while Congresswoman Melissa Bean (D-8) and Senator Richard Durbin have opposed it. Bean's district includes many northwestern communities who object to the increased train traffic expected if the deal goes through-some parts of the new route would see an increase in train from five to 20 per day.

In Chicago, Mayor Daley's administration supports the move, said Brian Steele, spokesman for the city's Department of Transportation, as does 3rd Ward Alderman Pat Dowell. Second Ward Alderman Robert Fioretti, whose ward includes parts of the track, said he needs to study the idea more.

Proposals to remove train traffic from the St. Charles Airline have been around since at least 1984. Steele said eventually the goal is to remove all rail traffic from the St. Charles line, opening up the area for development and green space.

"It would also help possibly develop some properties in that east-west corridor," Steele said. "That 16th Street viaduct area-it could be developed, it could be green space. Essentially removing rail traffic would open up a whole host of [possibilities]."

Residents of the area surrounding the St. Charles line, however, were a little more skeptical. Pagano said he first heard the railroad would be gone five years ago.

Asked if he had any sympathy for suburban communities that could have to deal with increased train traffic, Pagano said at least suburban homes are built further away from the trains.

"The condo owners would be more inconvenienced," he said.

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