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thelastword

Questioning CSX Project Is Not NIMBY!

I'm lucky to represent a diverse, engaged community, who worked together with me and members of my commission to respond to the inaccuracies of the Virginia Avenue Tunnel Draft Environmental Impact Statement, as well as address safety, environmental, timeline, and construction concerns related to the project, which proposes to dig a massive trench along Virginia Avenue SE between the Navy Yard and Capitol Hill communities for up to five years. I am proud that four of seven ANC 6D commissioners came together to support a letter that asks questions and offers suggestions for how to move forward in ways that are respectful of the community's thoughtful feedback.

If it moves forward, CSX's proposed project will impact the entire northern boundary of the Navy Yard neighborhood in mostly negative ways. On a neighborhood experience level, it will be more difficult for Capitol Hill residents to filter down to Yards and Canal Parks, and for Navy Yard residents to access Barracks Row, Garfield Park, and Eastern Market -- and it will hamper the Navy Yard neighborhood's fledgling businesses from being able to attract outside customers.

More seriously, it will put residents' health and safety at risk. We still don't have proper answers to such fundamental questions like "exactly how close will construction get to existing homes along Virginia Avenue and I Street SE," "how will emergency vehicles access those homes," and "why wasn't a re-routing option considered for the period of construction so that trains are not running in an open trench mere feet from houses, senior apartments, and military quarters?" These are in no way "not in my backyard" concerns, but speak to the community's desire to stay in our massively growing neighborhood, and to not have our safety, investments, and quality of life put at risk just to do so.

ANC David Garber (SMD 6D07) | dggarber@gmail.com

What About Derailments?

The DC Department of Transportation and The Federal Highway Administration are considering whether to allow CSX to tear a literal gash in our community for up to 66 months so that CSX may widen and deepen the Virginia Avenue Tunnel.

These agencies are not considering that CSX trains might not stay on their tracks. Accidents and terrorist attacks are nowhere addressed in the voluminous Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

As our neighbors in Baltimore are all too aware, these risks are real. A CSX train derailed in Baltimore's Howard Street Tunnel in 2001. From the Baltimore Sun:

"For a week much downtown activity stopped. Three Orioles games at nearby Camden Yards were canceled. Freight rail traffic along the East Coast was paralyzed. Temperatures in the tunnel rose as high as 1,500 degrees as a witches' brew of chemicals burned alongside paper and pulp products, and smoke poured from the openings." (From "Ten years after Baltimore tunnel fire, much is unchanged," 7/16/2011.)

Thousands of people were exposed to that witches' brew. The accident caused millions of dollars of damage to the city, its businesses, and residents.

Derailments are not rare. There were 20 CSX derailments in Maryland alone, from January 2010 to August 2012, the Baltimore Sun reported. Google "CSX derailments." You'll find plenty more.

Though some derailments are minor, we may not be so lucky. Here, trains could run on temporary tracks -- at 40 mph! -- only a few feet from major construction activity. And less than a mile from Congress, the Supreme Court, and other potential terrorist targets.

CSX did not report the Howard Street Tunnel derailment in a timely way. Their communications with first responders were poor. I don't have faith in their ability to properly

handle a similar incident – whether caused by accident or malfeasance – in the nation’s capital.

Or in my front yard.

Maureen Cohen Harrington | Virginia Avenue Resident | cohenbarrington@gmail.com

CSX Expansion Risks Neighborhood Toxic Spill

In 2004, after a major rail accident in South Carolina killed eight people, DC passed a law that banned hazardous materials in the city. The law was challenged by the Bush administration and the rail industry, led by CSX, and was overturned on the Department of Justice’s assertion that rail safety is a Federal responsibility.

Not only is CSX still transporting those materials but they are now proposing to increase the capacity of the same rails by more than two-fold. Less than a week after the tragic Lac-Mégantic derailment in July that killed at least 42 people, CSX put forward their final preferred options for expanding the capacity of Virginia Avenue Tunnel. It’s important to note that this is a project that has no local benefits; the current tunnel is a bottleneck on the entire CSX East Coast route, and rather than connect their route largely on existing rail rights-of-way outside the city as proposed by The National Capitol Planning Commission, CSX has taken the position that expanding the tunnel and increasing the danger to our neighborhood, this iconic city, and the country is the only option they will consider. Increasing their capacity, either through or around Washington, DC, will allow them to increase their profits along the entire length of the line.

Remarkably, given the city’s history of concern about rail safety, catastrophe prevention is absent from the criteria cited by CSX in their selection of preferred options. One may argue against the likelihood of a tragic incident like Lac-Mégantic, but it is undeniable that Washington, DC is the highest-profile potential terrorist target in the world, and this puts our neighborhood at increased risk. The risk to the Capitol Hill and Capitol Riverfront neighborhoods posed by this proposed expansion more than justifies the inclusion of alternative routing options outside the city for full consideration for the expansion of rail capacity on the east coast. Anything less puts CSX’s drive to increase profits

over the welfare of our neighborhood and our country.

Chris French | Capitol Riverfront Resident | cfrench@frenchstudios.com

Reroute The Trains During Construction

The Virginia Avenue Tunnel (VAT) Project Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) presents three build alternatives that all require the construction of a second rail track – either temporary or permanent. The DEIS improperly and arbitrarily discarded the reasonable alternative of temporarily rerouting trains on existing tracks during VAT construction (previously known as Concept 7). Temporarily rerouting trains would eliminate the need for building a second rail track. This could significantly reduce the construction time period, footprint, and overall environmental impact of the project. Inaccurate and misleading statements in the DEIS coupled with failure to evaluate Concept 7 leaves me concerned that the DEIS is not thorough or impartial.

On page 3-17, the DEIS states that “Although rerouting is common railroad practice under emergency conditions that are usually short in duration, negotiating a 2 plus-year operating agreement would be very difficult.” This is a misleading, uninformed and false statement. Based on history and track location, Norfolk Southern (NS) would be a likely partner in granting CSX trackage rights during construction in the VAT. The Surface Transportation Board has previously approved NS granting temporary trackage rights for two years’ time on March 13, 2013, for ten years’ time on May 16, 2013, and for four years’ time on November 17, 2006. However, the DEIS reveals that NS was not consulted in the preparation of the DEIS.

Furthermore, the DEIS failed to provide any substantial or fact-based justification for why temporary rerouting of trains during construction in the VAT was not brought forward for evaluation. Concept 7 requires full evaluation. The failure to consider Concept 7 for evaluation as a reasonable alternative is a violation of National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) guidelines. The responsible federal agencies need to withdraw the DEIS and issue a Supplemental Environmental Impact

Statement (SEIS) or a new DEIS that includes all reasonable alternatives including temporary rerouting of trains during construction.

TJ and Claire Oleksiak | Capitol Quarter Residents | claire.schaefer@gmail.com and tj.oleksiak@gmail.com

Virginia Avenue Tunnel Project Poses Health Risks for Residents

We are writing with concern about the Virginia Avenue Tunnel plan, (VAT) in which CSX proposes a massive construction project that slices through Capitol Hill, will last from 3-5 years (possibly more), and may include an open trench for freight trains.

Among other issues, we are deeply concerned about the increase in noise and pollution (including light pollution), the ability for Hill residents and visitors to travel across Virginia Ave. easily and safely, potential construction-related safety issues (especially for our kids), as well as a concern about the more than 300 trees that will be permanently removed as a result of this project. We are also concerned about the VAT construction’s impact on local businesses, especially considering the substantial federal and city investments made in the success of new businesses in Barracks Row and the Navy Yard neighborhoods.

In public statements, groups such as the Capitol Hill Restoration Society, the Committee of 100 on the Federal City, and the Sierra Club have criticized CSX’s VAT DEIS (Draft Environmental Impact Statement). They take issue with the project for various reasons, including that it is not necessary, poses health risks to the residents of Capitol Hill, and will cause considerable environmental damage and traffic problems.

Although CSX has been donating to many local projects recently, no CSX-sponsored festival or free jump ropes can make up for the adverse environmental implications of their VAT project and the ensuing increased train pollution it will bring to Capitol Hill. Please join us in educating yourself about the VAT, contacting public officials with your concerns, and keeping Capitol Hill a livable, walkable, safe community for our families.

Mark & Meredith Baker | meredith.benne@gmail.com

Speak Out Against The Virginia Avenue Tunnel Project

In deciding to live in a vibrant, growing community like Capitol Hill, we recognize there will be change. Positive change benefits everyone. We’ve enjoyed the recent developments taking place in the Navy Yard neighborhood – beautiful public parks, delicious restaurants, baseball games, kayaking, and much more. We acknowledge change is required to see the fruits of these benefits. One change on the horizon, however, threatens these benefits and provides no positive impact to the community.

Looking to increase its freight operations (and bottom line), CSX Corporation is planning a three to five year construction project to enlarge an existing tunnel beneath Virginia Avenue SE and Garfield Park. The project’s scope, as currently proposed, could result in an open-trench tunnel with exposed trains running at high speeds – effectively cutting Southeast Capitol Hill in half. To date, CSX has white-washed the project’s pollution, noise, and vibration impacts and continues to withhold information about how these impacts would be mitigated. More importantly, the project itself increases the risk of a catastrophic train derailment, like the one that killed almost 50 people in Quebec only three short months ago.

We must demand better for the neighborhood we love. Unfortunately, the project has crept under the radar (largely because CSX has spread enough money around to keep many happy). But many community groups have legitimate concerns, including Committee of 100 on the Federal City, Sierra Club, Capitol Hill Restoration Society, Capitol Quarter HOAs, ANCs, and our friends and neighbors among us.

If your family frequents Yards, Canal, or Garfield Park, Results Gym, Nationals games, summer concerts or if you are concerned about traffic, home values, or ensuring a safe and healthy neighborhood for your children, take notice now. Tommy Wells must lead on this issue – contact his office and ask what concrete steps he is taking to ensure the welfare, safety, and security of our vibrant neighborhood.

Jennifer McPhillips | 800 Block of Third St. SE | jen.mcphillips@gmail.com ★