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Pittsburgh Residents Call for Full Investigation into Merchant Street Bridge Repairs

Pittsburgh residents who would be impacted by the expansion of the Norfolk Southern rail line that passes through their communities are calling on the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission (PUC) to launch an investigation into whether the rail company is properly inspecting deteriorating rail infrastructure in the region, or ignoring the results of their inspections.

Residents, who've formed under the banner Rail Pollution Protection Pittsburgh (RP3), are particularly concerned about the aging Merchant Street Bridge in the Allegheny Commons. In addition, the group is asking that the state refreeze \$20 million in taxpayer funding that was frozen by Sen. Fontana in August 2018 until officials can confirm that Norfolk Southern is conducting proper inspections of ailing rail infrastructure in the area.

In response, State Sen. Wayne D. Fontana (D-Allegheny) issued the following statement calling for a full investigation.

"I have been told that the Commission may have the authority to stop all train traffic in the event of safety concerns or violations," Fontana wrote in a formal letter to the PUC dated Feb. 11. "I am asking for your (PUC's) invaluable understanding into this particular situation."

Norfolk Southern is moving at break-neck speed to expand its Allegheny County rail line to accommodate less stable double-stacked trains adjacent to volatile oil-by-rail cars through the densely-populated city. Unlike other cities in the U.S., the Pittsburgh rail line takes many twists and turns along aging rail lines and over old bridges. The rail line also traverses very old infrastructure, such as old sewer and water lines, that may be impacted by the increased loading and frequency of trains.

Crumbling steel infrastructure like the Merchant Street Bridge hasn't been rehabilitated in its 100-year life, said Glenn Olcerst of RP3. The bridge supports the transport of 2.8 billion gallons/year of extremely volatile Baaken crude, shale and tar sands oil – and other toxic chemicals including propane and chlorine – through Pittsburgh to the East coast refineries.

This month, a sinkhole spotted near the bridge appeared to have been hastily repaired with ballast stones.

"Some 209,000 people live and work within 1/2 mile of the 'blast zone' of this bridge," said Olcerst. "Given the length of these oil trains, a derailment at Merchant Street could jeopardize not only people but our rivers."

RP3 also questions the use of public monies by the rail industry to pay for infrastructure improvements.

“The public shouldn’t be subsidizing a profitable railroad company that hasn’t repaired infrastructure that the railroad has neglected,” said Barbara Talerico of RP3. “Before a penny of public money is spent, Norfolk Southern needs to follow through in its obligation to maintain its right-of-way and the infrastructure. We have no confidence that the railroad is doing what it needs to do to keep the community safe,” Talerico added. “The derailment on the South Side last year and this sinkhole is a good example and a warning.”

“Many people walk this route to downtown, to the T train and to the North Side stadiums, restaurants and businesses,” said Dan Wintermantel, a resident of Monterey Street in Pittsburgh. “The dark, damp, rusty, leaking bridge and underpass look like a scene from a horror movie. The recent discovery of a sinkhole in the rail bed above the heads of passing pedestrians is cause for grave concern. We urge you to take action before something awful happens.”

Two public meetings are planned next week. Media is invited to attend:

Monday, Feb. 25, 2019
6:30-8 p.m. Meeting
1st Presbyterian Church of Edgewood
120 E. Swissvale Ave., Pittsburgh 15218

Wednesday, Feb. 27, 2019
7 to 9 p.m.
Manchester Citizens Corp.
1319 Allegheny Ave., Pittsburgh, 15233

Photo: Merchant Street Rail Overpass (2011)/ Nathan Holth, [Historic Bridges](#)

ABOUT RP3

Rail Pollution Protection Pittsburgh (RP3) is a group of Pittsburgh residents committed to addressing the risk and impacts that expanding rail transport – and related oil/petrochemical facilities – have on nearby communities, especially public health, safety, air and water quality.