

Opinion: When it comes to railway safety, CN has missed the train

By **Véronique Fournier** Special to Global News February 24, 2014

MONTREAL – In Saint-Henri, late at night on February 23, the usual train sounds gave way to a subdued short thud and insistent whistles.

A surprising I-don't-know-what happened fewer than 100 metres from my house, a rumble at the end of my street that disturbed the life of my urban neighbourhood, whose heart beats to the rhythm of the passing trains.

What if it was an incident on the tracks?

Indeed it was.

A train derailment took place on a CN main line that runs along an east-west axis across Canada.

It took place at the De Courcelle intersection, not far from the Turcot Interchange and close to homes, community organizations and schools.

In the end, it was described as a spill of 3,500 litres of fuel. In other words, according to CN, sleep well, it wasn't carrying any dangerous goods.

In the same location on August 19, 2013, accompanied by the mayor for the Sud-Ouest borough, Benoit Dorais, and the then-leader of the City of Montreal's official opposition, Louise Harel, I asked for more transparency on how hazardous materials are transported by rail.

Six months later, this incident demonstrates once again the importance of risk management for rail safety.

Steps have been taken, notably, the unanimous position of the Montreal city council demanding to know what is carried across our cities.

Without jurisdiction over rail transport, Quebec and Canadian municipalities must urge Ottawa to act.

Yet the federal government is dragging its feet, and unfortunately, the Transportation Safety Board does not have the teeth necessary to enforce change. This should be remedied.

A similar incident without any serious consequences took place in the heart of Pointe-Saint-Charles on September 24, 2011, again near homes, a community centre, a library and a school.

In its report, the Transportation Safety Board pointed to the speed of trains as one of the causes.

Worried residents have continued to call for CN to take its responsibilities to local communities seriously – and with good reason!

In Pointe-Saint-Charles, CN did not even bother to report the incident, claiming that it had occurred in the yard.

What will be said in Saint-Henri this time?

Residents are entitled to expect that CN acts with transparency and takes its responsibilities to heart.

What guarantee do those who live in dense urban environments have that CN is prepared to deal with railway incidents?

Ironically, this incident took place where, in 2012, the CN inaugurated its first Canadian eco-connection project to improve the quality of life of communities along the tracks.

We hope that the causes of this latest incident and its impact on the community will be made public within a reasonable amount of time.

We also hope that the residents of neighbourhoods criss-crossed by trains will continue to put pressure on CN to make it a better corporate citizen, responsible and accountable – and not just planting trees.

Véronique Fournier is a Saint-Henri resident and a former city councillor for Saint-Henri–Petite-Bourgogne–Pointe-Saint-Charles from 2009-2013.