

Local Railway Items from Ottawa Papers - 2014

Thursday 14/01/2014 Ottawa Citizen Otrain

O-Train upgrade targeted for late-February completion

The completion of the long-awaited upgrade to the O-Train system is still more than a month away, a city official said Wednesday.

The \$60-million project, which council approved in June 2011, was supposed to be finished by last September, but delays have now pushed that date into late February.

The current goal is to begin offering the expanded service on Feb. 21.

However, if you're marking your calendar, it might be wise to use pencil.

"There are unexpected circumstances that we can come across and there may be something that comes up that impacts our schedule," said Richard Holder, a manager in the city's rail implementation office, which is overseeing the project.

Snow and cold make this a challenging time of year to implement a new system and provide a 100 per cent guarantee on a delivery date, he said. "We're doing our best to meet a plan."

In the meantime, testing and tinkering continues.

Workers this week were completing some track work and making a few minor modifications to the track-and-signalling system based on the results of testing conducted before Christmas.

Part of the delay is because half way through 2014, the signalling system the city was planning to use had to change due to new federal protocols.

Starting Sunday, mock service using the new trains will begin overnight. Holder said this is called "systems acceptance testing". Essentially, it's to make sure everything works together and the various systems are talking to each other properly.

The mock service will operate several nights a week for four weeks, between 10:30 or 11 p.m. and 5 a.m.

There will, of course, be no passengers on board, as drivers familiarize themselves with the new trains and with having four trains on the line at a time.

For rail buffs, this will be the first chance to see the city's new Alstom Lint trains in action.

If everything goes as planned, at the end of the four weeks, O-Train service will be shut down for six days for final operator training and to fully complete the switch from the old system to new by making physical changes to the platforms and signage at stations.

"Once those changes have been made, that's when we can start the full service," Holder said.

The shutdown is currently scheduled to begin on Feb. 14. That timing coincides Carleton University's reading week, so ridership demand would likely be lower that week.

As it has during previous shutdowns, OC Transpo will operate a parallel bus service along the O-Train route. The city will also keep that service in place for the first week of operation under the upgraded system, in case any problems arise, Holder said.

Once completed, the upgraded O-Train service will run approximately every nine minutes at most times of the day and every 15 minutes late in the evening and on Sundays between Bayview and Greenboro stations.

Thursday 30/01/2014 Ottawa Citizen Beachburg Portage du Fort

Ottawa places potential purchase of railway line on hold.

Buying part of a railway line between Ontario and Quebec isn't worth it for Ottawa, according to city staff, so Ottawa will hold off on a potential purchase until the railway is decommissioned.

After a surplus portion of the Beachburg Subdivision line was slated to be ripped by the Canadian National Railway, Ottawa's transportation committee wanted to know how much it would cost to buy part of the line. The price for the whole line and its tracks is \$21.7 million.

The city also wrote a letter requesting a delay in the tracks being scrapped, to help Quebec communities in the Pontiac that were hoping to save the freight tracks to boost the economy.

But a report from Ottawa's deputy city manager Nancy Schepers, bound for the city's transportation committee next week, declares staff will not pursue a purchase while the tracks remain.

Costs "measured in the millions of dollars" and responsibilities of running a rail line wouldn't benefit the city enough, Schepers wrote.

"Furthermore, the purchase of active railways would require these expenditures to be made with little or no benefit in return for the City and residents," she said.

The Pontiac lost a court injunction application late last year that would have bought more time to find a buyer. The line's Renfrew County tracks have already been ripped up and no potential buyers had come forward for the rest as of December, the report said.

If the Pontiac isn't successful in finding a partner or operator of the railway, and CN approaches Ottawa about the portion here, the city "will move to reach a purchase agreement for the corridor lands," the report states.

Locally, the line runs from near western Carling Avenue in Ottawa and extends to Pembroke. It crosses the Ottawa River twice.

Wednesday 12/02/2014 Ottawa Citizen Smiths Falls Fallowfield

Warning signals at the site of a fatal crash between a Via train and an OC Transpo bus last September malfunctioned Tuesday night, forcing OC Transpo to close the Transitway, a memo to city councillors says.

"At 10:16 p.m. last night (February 11, 2014), an OC Transpo operator approached the rail crossing signal at the level crossing near the Fallowfield Transit Station on the Southwest Transitway," wrote OC Transpo general manager John Manconi. "The signals were activated and one of the crossing arms was in the down position. The operator immediately notified the OC Transpo control centre advising of the circumstances as there were no trains present or approaching and the crossing signal on the adjacent Woodroffe Avenue was not activated."

The crossing signals are the responsibility of Via Rail, which owns the track. A contractor working for Via showed up to repair them while buses were rerouted to Woodroffe, Manconi wrote. The last train of the day, just after 11 p.m., helped to confirm the signals were working again.

Manconi's informed the Transportation Safety Board and Employment and Social Development Canada, both of which are investigating last September's crash at that crossing, his note concluded.

In that crash, a double-decker bus plowed through a lowered gate into the side of a Via train headed for Fallowfield station. Six people, including the bus driver, were killed. It's not yet certain why the bus didn't stop, whether the bus's brakes failed or driver Dave Woodard didn't use them, and if not, why not.

Since that crash, at least two incidents have been reported in which operators took their buses across the tracks even though the lights were flashing to warn of an oncoming train. In the first case, Manconi defended the driver, saying data from the bus's and train's computers indicated he'd have had to slam on the brakes, likely knocking riders over, to stop before reaching the tracks, and the train was still far away. In the second case, OC Transpo's last word a couple of weeks ago was that they were still trying to work out which bus was involved.

In the early 2000s, the city had planned to dig an underpass for both Woodroffe Avenue and the Transitway next to it: the roads and the tracks were busy enough to warrant the separation in the interest of safety. The project was abandoned when it turned out that unusual underground rock and water conditions made it much more expensive than the city expected.

Work on the Via tracks where they cross the Transitway near Barrhaven closed the busway on Friday for the second time in a week. City spokeswoman Nikki Eaton refused to say whether the closure, which lasted about an hour in early afternoon, was for scheduled work or an emergency repair. The signals malfunctioned Tuesday night and a bus driver encountered them flashing with no train in sight. One warning gate was down and the other up. That took about 40 minutes to fix.

Friday's work had nothing to do with the signals, said Via spokeswoman Mylène Bélanger from Montreal. "It was just some routine maintenance work on the railway at the crossing. Nothing major."

"We were fixing a piece of concrete."

It wasn't clear why the work had to be done in the middle of the day, when buses had to be detoured, or how much notice Via gave OC Transpo.

In a note to city councillors, transit general manager John Manconi implied the closure came without warning but it wasn't clear whether that was because it was an emergency or just carelessness on Via Rail's part.

"We have just been advised by Via Rail/Rail Term (a rail maintenance contractor) that they require the shutdown of the Transitway near Fallowfield station to undertake work to the signal crossing near the Fallowfield station. Buses are being diverted to Woodroffe Avenue," said the note, sent at 1:31 p.m. Friday. About an hour later, he wrote to say the Transitway had been reopened.

Bélanger wasn't immediately sure how much warning Via gave the city.

The crossing was the site of a crash last September that killed six people headed toward downtown on an OC Transpo bus.

"Any inquiries related to the work at the lights should be directed to VIA," Eaton wrote in response to a Citizen question Friday. Manconi's note also said that if councillors wanted to know more, they'd have to ask Via.

OTTAWA A broken down City of Ottawa truck and extreme cold are the culprits behind what appeared to be malfunctioning warning signals at a high-profile rail-crossing in Barrhaven where six people were killed last year.

Bus drivers are understandably cautious when crossing the train tracks near Fallowfield station where an OC Transpo bus collided with a VIA train. That's why they were quick to report twice last week when warning lights and the crossing arms were activated even though no train was approaching.

There was confusion about what happened at the site for more than a week until VIA Rail security staff explained the details on Friday. In an interview with the Citizen, they confirmed the first incident occurred Feb. 11 around 9:30 p.m. when a train went by and the lights remained on until after 10 p.m., when they were noticed by an OC Transpo bus driver approaching on the Transitway.

A heater designed to keep a sensor clear from frost took longer to work than usual that night, said Nicolas Panetta, senior adviser corporate security with VIA. This meant the crossing arm and lights remained activated until the heater cleared the sensor.

The second incident happened Friday morning when a city truck broke down on the Eagleson crossing west of Fallowfield. That led to a shutdown of all train traffic in the area, which meant a train slowly backing out of the Fallowfield station had to stop.

The train sensors recognized the train and kept the warning signals activated until the scene was cleared.

"We don't take a chance, we just shut it down right away," Panetta said.

Panetta described the false alarm with the sensor on Feb. 11 as a bit of a malfunction, but said both of last week's incidents were rather routine. If anything, the signals are working well because they are staying activated when something goes wrong, which is what they're supposed to do.

Transpo general manager John Manconi insisted the incidents were not caused by any "malfunction," saying news media reports were incorrect.

"I don't know where that came from, that's not our word," he told the Citizen on Thursday.

In a memo he sent to councillors last week, however, he clearly explained "that the rail signals at the crossing on the Transitway near the Fallowfield station were malfunctioning" on Feb. 11.

Both incidents last week were reported to the Transportation Safety Board and Employment and Social Development Canada, the two organizations investigating the September crash.

In that tragic collision, a double-decker bus pushed through the lowered crossing arm and slammed into the side of a Via train headed for Fallowfield station. Six people, including bus driver Dave Woodard, were killed. It's not yet known whether the bus's brakes failed or Woodard didn't use them.

Since that crash, at least four incidents have been reported in which operators took their buses across the tracks even though the lights were flashing to warn of an oncoming train.

In the first case, Manconi defended the driver, saying data from the bus's and train's computers indicated he would have needed to slam on the brakes, likely knocking riders over, to stop before reaching the tracks, and the train was still far away. In the second case, OC Transpo's last word a couple of weeks ago was that it was still trying to work out which bus was involved.

In the early 2000s, the city had planned to dig an underpass for both Woodroffe Avenue and the Transitway next to it: the roads and the tracks were considered busy enough to warrant the separation in the interest of safety.

The project was abandoned when it turned out that unusual underground rock and water conditions would have made it much more expensive than the city had expected.

Safety watchdog makes recommendations after latest OC Transpo incidents at Barrhaven rail crossing

Since the fatal bus-train collision that killed six people in Barrhaven last year, OC Transpo buses, on four occasions, have driven through the same rail crossing while warning lights were activated, according to observations from the Transportation Safety Board.

The safety watchdog made the statement in one of two letters of recommendation issued to the city on Tuesday regarding the reported incidents.

The TSB said it is calling on the city to "implement additional measures to ensure that buses can safely stop in advance of an activated railway crossing signal."

In the four incidents, the warning lights were activated, but the crossing arm had not yet come down, according to the letter. TSB also observed that bus drivers do not always slow down as they approach the crossing on the Transitway near the Fallowfield station.

"According to most driver handbooks, when approaching a crossing, the vehicle driver should slow down, be prepared to stop, and yield the right of way to a train," according to an accompanying news release.

The TSB said that failing to stop when railway crossing signals are activated violates most provincial highway traffic acts. It also points out that "These acts may not necessarily apply to vehicles operating on private roads, such as the OC Transpo Transitway."

TSB also looked into another incident when warning lights and the south crossing gate remained activated after a train went by. Investigators confirmed what Via Rail said last week, that the automated crossing protection system went into fail-safe mode as it is designed to do.

Frost on electrical contacts was the source of the problem. While the crossing protection was still activated, three buses drove through the crossing, and one OC Transpo supervisor attempted to lift the south gate.

"Reasonable steps were taken to minimize risk, and there were no adverse consequences, but there are still opportunities to improve safety," TSB reported.

Investigators would not normally look into such incidents, but the TSB said it followed up on them "in light of heightened public concern."

The TSB is separately investigating the deadly collision that occurred on the morning of Sept. 18.

Barrhaven Coun. Jan Harder said on Tuesday that the TSB and the city have been in constant communication during the safety watchdog's investigation.

"We said ... from the beginning, 'We will do what we need to do as recommendations come forward. Don't wait until the full report is ready. We want to know what you're finding as you go along,' " she said.

A memo from City Manager Kent Kirkpatrick said the city will review the TSB letters to address the matters being raised.

The memo, addressed to Mayor Jim Watson, members of council and members of the transit commission, noted that the city has already reduced the speed limit in the area to 50 km/h from 80 km/h, and is installing an amber early-warning signal for northbound Transitway traffic.

He said other planned measures include installing an amber early-warning signal for southbound Transitway Traffic, reviewing potential speed reductions and reviewing the bylaw that governs vehicles on the Transitway.

The Transitway is a city road and thus isn't governed by the province's Highway Traffic Act.

In the memo, Kirkpatrick also touted measures already undertaken by OC Transpo, such as written directives to drivers reminding them to exercise safe and defensive driving practices, among other instructions.

There are also daily internal radio announcements reminding drivers to exercise caution when approaching a rail crossing, and to adhere to posted speed limits.

All new bus operators also now visit the Transitway crossing at Fallowfield as part of their training, the memo said.

Monday 03/03/2014 CFRA

Alexandria

Alexandria

An extra locomotive on a VIA Rail train caught fire Sunday afternoon just east of Ottawa.

A rider on the train tells CFRA VIA staff evacuated the people in the back car, closest to the extra locomotive being pulled by the train to another destination, to others seats while the fire was put out by crews from Alexandria's fire department.

The train stalled at Canyon Concession Road near Alexandria around 4 p.m. It got rolling again at 6:30p.m. and VIA Rail did not need to send buses for the passengers though, a VIA Rail spokesperson told CFRA they were prepared to.

The stalled train was coming from Montreal, stopping in Ottawa then continuing to Toronto it's train number 57. VIA Rail says the stalled trip will delay number 59 from Toronto to Montreal by about 40 minutes Sunday evening.

There were no injuries and no word on what caused the fire on the locomotive - which was non-operational and just being pulled by the train to another destination.

<http://www.cfra.com/news/2014/03/02/via-rail-extra-locomotive-catches-fire-near-alexandria>

Police probed rail glitches before Raitt's public appeal

No foul play was found in crossing malfunctions

There is no current evidence to suggest that any foul play is involved.

An Ottawa detective had already investigated rail crossing malfunctions and the possibility of a tampering incident when Transport Minister Lisa Raitt publicly called for a police probe.

Internal Ottawa police documents, released under freedom-of-information legislation, show police officers were concerned and caught off guard by the request for an investigation on April 10. The request came the day after an acting inspector wrote a memo saying the earlier investigation found "No evidence of foul play."

Raitt, who oversees Via Rail, asked the Crown corporation to call on Ottawa police and CN Rail police to open an investigation because of "information she was provided that the malfunctions at the Barrhaven crossing may have been caused by something other than technical failures," Raitt's press secretary, Jana Regimbal, said in an email Wednesday.

"The Minister did not make the call to the police," Regimbal said. "The Minister was unaware that the Ottawa Police had already launched an investigation."

Police had started an investigation - six days before Raitt's request. A detective followed up on a call from a technician from RailTerm, the contract company that maintains tracks, who had been stationed to watch for malfunctions starting that day. The employee said he discovered a box containing railway crossing arm controls open at the Fallowfield crossing. It is usually locked and would require a tool to open, according to police notes. Earlier he'd seen "silhouettes" of a group of people in the area but thought nothing of it until he saw the box.

"There is no current evidence to suggest that any foul play is involved but we are doing our due diligence to rule it out," the acting inspector wrote in an email.

Det. Amy Haggerty, the officer assigned to the file, wrote in her notes that she spoke to the technician "at length about the ongoing issues with the crossings ... He states that he does not believe the malfunctions have been suspicious prior to this incident (although it should be noted that this incident did NOT cause a malfunction)."

Police statistics had already been compiled: between January and April, police responded to at least 35 calls for malfunctioning rail lights and arms, resulting in 57 police units being dispatched over the months. Not having a specific rail malfunction code in the database system meant the number could be low, a crime analyst cautioned.

Over the next few days, Haggerty talked to RailTerm's track maintenance manager, Via's director of infrastructure and a Via police senior investigator. The Via manager told Haggerty he didn't believe there was "any criminal aspect" to the malfunctions. He said many reports of railway lights and arms not working were false alarms but acknowledged there could be a higher than normal volume of malfunctions. The RailTerm manager described Barrhaven residents as "hyper-vigilant," Haggerty wrote, because of proximity to the site of the Sept. 18, 2013, crash of an OC Transpo bus and a Via train in which six people died. There was no malfunction at the time of the crash.

On April 9, the acting inspector sent a memo to one of the deputy chiefs explaining no foul play had been found. Malfunction causes "have been identified as technical in nature and explainable."

The next evening, after Raitt's office told reporters she wanted police called in, Ottawa officers seemed to have received no notification. Chief Charles Bordeleau wrote an email shortly before 9 p.m. asking one of his deputies to find out what Via wanted, whether a formal request had been made, and if the municipal force even had any jurisdiction.

A sergeant, after summarizing the series of events in a different email chain, said: "So all that to say, it appears we are continuing to investigate."

"What concerns me is how this got elevated to where we are right now without proper communication being provided," wrote another officer. "Further, that the belief is, without proper evidence to support the claim, that this is a criminal matter."

In another series of emails, an officer noted "increased political attention" the situation was getting. As well as having the attention of municipal politicians and Raitt, Ottawa West-Nepean MP John Baird was also calling on Via to sort out the problem. By the end of April, he was demanding Via's interim chief executive step down. A permanent CEO was put in place in May.

After a meeting on April 11 with Ottawa police, Via Rail police and RailTerm, Haggerty went to seven rail crossings with a forensic identification officer, looked further for video footage, and reviewed RailTerm data.

The officer had a similar conclusion on April 15 to her earlier finding. "At this time there is absolutely no evidence that indicates there is any criminal activity involved in the on going malfunction issues at the rail crossings in Barrhaven," she wrote.

Via has since stationed a former chief operating officer to oversee response to numerous problems in Ottawa that could be to blame for the frequent reported glitches and fail-safe modes. Raitt's emergency directive on six grade crossings, to ensure safe crossing of passenger and freight trains, is in effect until November.

New lawsuit by passenger in OC Transpo-Via Rail train crash seeks \$800,000

The City of Ottawa is facing a second lawsuit over a fatal crash between an OC Transpo bus and a Via Rail train.

Surviving passenger Humayun Sharif, his wife and two children filed an \$800,000 lawsuit on Friday alleging that the city and bus driver David Woodard's negligence resulted in Sharif being permanently and seriously disfigured and injured.

According to the statement of claim, Sharif said he suffered injuries to his head, neck, back, shoulders, legs, knees, ankles, feet, arms and hands in the Sept. 18 crash at a railway crossing on the Transitway near Woodroffe Avenue and the Fallowfield transit station.

Six people were killed in the crash, including Woodard.

According to the statement of claim, Sharif was seated on the bus when it collided with the train around 8:45 a.m. after driving through a lowered warning arm. Sharif alleges that Woodard ignored the visible signal devices, was driving at an excessive speed given the circumstances, and that he failed to bring the No. 76 express bus to a safe stop, among other allegations.

The crash fractured Sharif's right knee and broke a bone in his foot and caused a large hematoma to the back of his head.

Sharif alleges that he now suffers from severe headaches, phobia, dizziness, disturbed sleep and nightmares.

Sharif's lawsuit is the second filed against the city and Woodard's estate.

The family of passenger Michael Bleakney, who was killed in the crash, have also filed a \$1.8-million lawsuit.

Four other passengers - Connor Boyd, Kyle Nash, Rob More and Karen Krzyzewski - were also killed.

Signals malfunction twice on Tuesday near site of fatal bus-train crash

OTTAWA - Police were called Tuesday night to a Barrhaven railway crossing for reported signal malfunctioning, hours after earlier signal issues.

Around 9 p.m., Acting Staff Sgt. Dave Bal said, a member of the public called police to the crossing again for malfunctioning signals. Police had been called there in the morning for the same reason.

"There was some traffic issues as a result, in terms of traffic being backed up. The arms went down when no train was going by, basically," Bal said.

Police awaited Via repair crews until repairs were made around 10:45 p.m. Officers stayed until 11 p.m. as a precaution when the last train passed by and there were no further signal issues.

Earlier in the day, Via said there was nothing alarming about warning signals malfunctioning in the morning at the crossing of Fallowfield Road between Greenbank Road and Woodroffe Avenue. The crossing is near the site of last year's fatal crash between a Via train and an OC Transpo bus.

Police said they were called just before 6:30 a.m. to direct traffic. Buses were initially detoured, but were soon back to travelling on the transitway.

Railterm, a VIA Rail contractor responsible for repairs, maintenance and technical support, was on the scene to fix the problem.

The repairs lasted into the afternoon. Via Rail's Twitter account reported just after 3:15 p.m. that the situation was resolved.

Via Rail spokesman Jacques C. Gagnon said such signal problems are a "normal occurrence" and that Railterm staff inspect each crossing signal a minimum of twice a week.

Signals can be activated by a number of different things, he said, including winter weather or road salt, which when combined with water becomes a conduit for electricity and can ignite signals.

Gagnon said that because of the Sept. 18 crash, Via Rail understands why there is particular sensitivity at that crossing and those nearby.

In the Sept. 18 crash that killed six people at a level rail crossing at Woodroffe Avenue north of Fallowfield station, a double-decker bus crashed through a lowered gate into the side of a Via train headed for Fallowfield station. The cause of the crash is not yet known.

Gagnon said that if Via Rail trains arrive at a crossing with signal problems, the rules state that one of the two engineers aboard the locomotive must step outside and walk alongside the train to ensure that there are no vehicles, pedestrians or other obstacles at the crossing.

On Tuesday, Railterm staff were dispatched to the site of the malfunction as soon as railway traffic control was alerted, Gagnon said.

Lisa Kelly, 23, said she was on her way to work around 6:35 a.m. when she saw the signals malfunctioning.

The lights were flashing and traffic was backed up because people weren't sure if they were allowed to cross or not, Kelly said.

"It was kind of a strange feeling, knowing what happened there," Kelly said. "It was a bit unsettling."

Last month, the federal Transportation Safety Board wrote two letters of recommendation to the city regarding safety at rail crossings. The TSB looked into an incident where warning lights and the south gate at the crossing where September's fatal crash occurred remained activated after a train went by.

Frost on electrical contacts was the source of the problem. While the crossing protection was still activated, three buses drove through the crossing, and one OC Transpo supervisor attempted to lift the south gate.

"Reasonable steps were taken to minimize risk, and there were no adverse consequences, but there are still opportunities to improve safety," the TSB reported.

Thursday

13/03/2014

Ottawa Citizen

Smiths Falls

Fallowfield Road

City prepares bylaw to penalize transit drivers who ignore railway warning lights

OTTAWA - The city will crack down on OC Transpo drivers who drive through railway crossings even though warning lights are flashing, according to a memo released Wednesday.

It's the latest response to last month's revelation that since Sept. 18's fatal bus-train collision in Barrhaven, OC Transpo buses have driven through that same crossing four times while warning lights were activated.

The federal Transportation Safety Board, in one of two safety letters to the city last month, called on the city to implement additional measures to ensure that buses can safely stop in advance of an activated railway crossing signal.

Since then, according to Wednesday's memo by deputy city manager Steve Kanellakos, city lawyers and OC Transpo staff have found that changing the transit bylaw governing vehicles on the Transitway is justified. He wrote that staff are finalizing details of the bylaw change that would prohibit vehicles from crossing a railway when there is warning of an approaching train - in order to create an offence similar to what is currently found in the Highway Traffic Act to prohibit vehicles from crossing at a railway crossing when a warning of an approaching train is given.

The Transitway is a private city road and thus isn't governed by the province's Highway Traffic Act. The TSB said that failing to stop when railway crossing signals are activated violates most provincial highway traffic acts.

City staff will also conduct a "comprehensive review" of transitway speed limits from the Nepean Sportsplex to south of Fallowfield Station, the memo said.

Following the deadly Sept. 18 collision between an OC Transpo bus and Via Rail train that killed six people, including the bus driver, the city reduced the speed limit in the vicinity of the crossing to 50 kilometres an hour from 80 km/h.

Last month, the TSB issued two safety letters to the city.

One of the letters described four incidents in which the warning lights were activated but the crossing arm had not yet come down. The TSB also observed that bus drivers do not always slow down as they approach the crossing on the Transitway near the Fallowfield station.

The board also recommended installing an amber early-warning signal for southbound traffic.

City staff are also conducting an engineering review regarding a southbound early-warning signal. The city and Via Rail are already working on a signal for northbound traffic, the memo said.

Wednesday's memo also said the city received a direction from the federal Department of Employment and Social Development that said OC Transpo "had not sufficiently identified and assessed the workplace health and safety-related hazards at railway crossings where operators are required to work" in light of federal labour laws.

The city has retained safety engineering consultants to review that issue.

Friday

28/03/2014

Ottawa Citizen

Smiths Falls

Fallowfield Road

Third lawsuit filed arising from fatal bus-train crash

OTTAWA — The family of another passenger killed in the crash between an OC Transpo bus and a Via Rail train has filed a lawsuit against the city and the estate of the dead driver.

Rob More's family launched the \$600,000 lawsuit Tuesday. It's the third lawsuit filed against the city since the Sept. 18 crash at a level crossing near the Fallowfield Transitway station that killed five passengers plus the driver David Woodard.

More's parents and his sister say they have each suffered a loss of care, guidance and companionship of the 35-year-old More. More, who had cerebral palsy, lived with his sister during the week and with his parents on weekends, according to the statement of claim.

More, an employee of IBM Canada, was on his way to work. He was seated at the front of the bus when it collided with the train.

The lawsuit alleges that driver Woodard was negligent when he drove through the flashing warning lights and crossing gate and hit the side of the train.

Woodard's estate and the city have also been sued for \$1.8 million by the family of passenger Michael Bleakney, who was killed in the crash. Surviving passenger Humanyun Sharif, his wife and two children filed an \$800,000 lawsuit alleging that the city and that negligence of the part of Woodard resulted in Sharif's being permanently and seriously disfigured and injured.

The families of the three other passengers killed in the crash - Connor Boyd, Kyle Nash and Karen Krzyzewski - have yet to file a lawsuit.

Another signal problem at Fallowfield railway crossing

OTTAWA - Traffic at a Barrhaven railway crossing was disrupted by a signal malfunction Friday evening, the second such malfunction at that crossing this month.

Police received calls just after 5:30 p.m. that railway warning signals were flashing and gates were down at the Fallowfield Road railway crossing between Greenbank Road and Woodroffe Avenue, even though there were no trains passing through.

Drivers reported delays as long as 20 minutes at the crossing, and OC Transpo buses were delayed by at least 10 minutes.

Police officers directed traffic while Via Rail-contracted staff made repairs. That work was still going on around 8 p.m. Friday.

Earlier this month, an early-morning signal malfunction at the same crossing briefly snarled traffic. Repairs that day took until mid-afternoon.

Via Rail has said in the past that such signal problems are a normal occurrence and that staff at Railterm, a VIA contractor responsible for repairs, maintenance and technical support, inspect each crossing signal at least twice a week.

Signals can be activated by a number of things, including winter weather or road salt, which when combined with water becomes a conduit for electricity and can ignite signals.

The railway crossing is near the site of last year's fatal crash between a Via train and an OC Transpo bus.

In the Sept. 18 crash that killed six people at a level rail crossing at Woodroffe Avenue north of Fallowfield station, a double-decker bus crashed through a lowered gate into the side of a Via train headed for Fallowfield station. The cause of the crash is still under investigation.

Wednesday 02/04/2014 Ottawa Citizen Smiths Falls Fallowfield Road

Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson calls on Via to fix rail crossing.

OTTAWA - Via Rail needs to get its act together and fix the faulty railway crossing near the site of last year's fatal crash between a passenger train and an OC Transpo double-decker bus, a tough-talking Jim Watson said Tuesday.

The mayor was to raise his concerns during a telephone call with Via's acting president, Steve Del Bosco.

At least eight signal malfunctions over the past three months have caused angst in the community and among people who cross the tracks there every day, Watson said.

"I've become more and more frustrated with the fact that these are Via signals and they're not working properly and they're eroding confidence of both the city and the public who have to travel across that particular roadway," he said.

"Clearly there's a problem and it's a Via problem, and they've got to get their act together and they've got to fix it."

Watson said this isn't a case, as a Via spokesman suggested last month, of people being more sensitive following the Sept. 18 crash at a level crossing that killed six people after a double-decker bus crashed through a lowered gate and into the side of a Via train headed for Fallowfield station.

The crossing gates are going down when there's no train or are not going down when there is a train, Watson said, adding he's prepared to call federal Transport Minister Lisa Raitt if the problem is not resolved soon.

"If I'm not satisfied, then I'll go speak to the minister of transportation and ask her to intervene to get Via Rail to do its job," Watson said.

A Via spokesman said last month that such signal problems are a "normal occurrence" and that staff from Railterm, the company contracted to maintain the signals, inspect each crossing signal at least twice a week.

Signals can be activated by a number of different things, he said at the time, including winter weather or road salt, which, when combined with water, becomes a conduit for electricity and can ignite signals

The families of two of the passengers killed in the crash, as well as a passenger who survived, have all launched lawsuits against the city and the estate of the dead driver, David Woodard.

The cause of the crash is not yet known.

Late Tuesday, in an email to councillors, Watson said Del Bosco assured him that fixing the technical issues is a priority for Via Rail.

"He says that VIA Rail's best technical staff and resources " both internal and external "are reviewing the signals, and will update the City in the coming weeks," Watson's email said.

Saturday 06/04/2014 Ottawa Citizen Smiths Falls Fallowfield Road

Via Rail posting staff at Ottawa crossings, including site of fatal crash

'I just want the damn thing fixed,' MP says

OTTAWA - Via Rail is posting staff at the Fallowfield-area rail crossings around the clock -including the site of last year's fatal crash between a passenger train and an OC Transpo double-decker bus — to monitor faulty signals, after Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird told Transport Canada officials to have the problem fixed with a week.

"I'm furious," said Baird on Friday after hearing that a rail-crossing signal failed for the ninth time since the fatal crash between an OC Transpo bus and a train last fall. The minister then took it upon himself to speak to people in the federal transportation department, including his cabinet colleague, Transport Minister Lisa Raitt.

"I want the head of VIA Rail to stand there to make sure it's working, until it's fixed," said Baird. "If he needs a little tent, we can live with that, if that's what's necessary. But I want this fixed within a week.

"I don't want any excuses. I don't want any committees. I don't want another six months of chasing their tails around. I just want the damn thing fixed."

Although Via's interim chief executive Steve Del Bosco won't personally be camped out by the rail crossings, Via will now have personnel in the vicinity to monitor the level crossings at Fallowfield Road, Woodroffe Avenue and the OC Transpo Transitway until further notice.

The workers will monitor the function of the automatic warning devices and take steps to ensure public safety if a device acts up while making necessary repairs. As the MP for Ottawa West-Nepean, Baird recognizes that a rail crossing malfunction in this area is almost as much about emotional well-being as it is about actual safety.

"It's still very raw in the community," said the minister referring to the tragic Sept. 18 crash. "My friends, my family, drive by there. They want to know that it's working. Every time I drive by it I think about the tragedy that happened and the lives that were lost. "

Baird was not the only elected official fuming mad at Via.

Friday morning's signal malfunction was the last straw for Mayor Jim Watson, too.

"I let it be known to our city manager (Kent Kirkpatrick) that I was fed up with what was happening in the Barrhaven area and I wanted a solution," he said.

"I was probably too angry to speak with someone at Via. I'd probably say something I'd regret later because I was just so annoyed."

Via staff were on the scene Friday morning and the company said workers would remain there until the situation was resolved. The company issues a news release that, among other things, apologized for any inconvenience.

The issue of faulty signals gained steam Tuesday when a tough-talking Watson said Via needed to get its act together to resolve the problem.

"I've become more and more frustrated with the fact that these are Via signals and they're not working properly and they're eroding confidence of both the city and the public who have to travel across that particular roadway," he told reporters after a finance committee meeting.

"Clearly there's a problem and it's a Via problem, and they've got to get their act together and they've got to fix it."

When going ballistic is the way to travel.

Baird, not Watson, gets Via Rail to move

In politics, evidently, it is sometimes wiser to throw a hissy-fit than call a meeting.

Witness the ongoing fiasco of the Via Rail crossing near Fallowfield station. All it took to finally get some action was for John Baird to go nuclear, start naming names and deliver some nasty in the public square.

"I want the head of Via Rail to stand there to make sure it's working, until it's fixed," the area MP and foreign affairs minister spat out on Friday. "If he needs a little tent, we can live with that, if that's what's necessary. But I want this fixed within a week."

No more meetings, no more excuses.

It is to cheer, whatever you might think of Baird. In a city where we need a task force to decide whether the sun is shining, how refreshing to hear someone in authority say: "Cut the crap and don't show your face until the mess is fixed. Now get out."

The optics, at least, are that Jim Watson may be mayor of Ottawa, but Baird is the capital's godfather whose ring must be kissed in order to get real things done. Upon your throne, your Worship.

Watson, you'll recall, was on the horn with senior Via executives earlier in the week and managed to squeeze out a commitment that the faulty signals would be fixed within four weeks.

And this, seven months after six people were killed at the intersection? And with - what? - as many as nine malfunctions since? It's a miracle the signals were working properly on the day of the crash.

The problem, as we understand it, is not that the lights and barriers are failing to work when a train is approaching traffic, but the opposite. The lights are going off when no train is coming, leading to traffic chaos and jittery motoring for commuters still on edge. If Via were a home alarm company, honestly, they would have been fired months ago.

Via has vowed to have personnel on site 24/7 until further notice. Call me a skeptic, but I'm not sure I believe them. A worker will be on site at 3 a.m., when neither trains nor buses are travelling? Now things are getting stupid.

I drove out Sunday morning to have a look-see. There was no one around the main intersection where the tracks cross four lanes of Woodroffe and the parallel Transitway. But there did appear to be a man in a parked pickup truck near the intersection of the tracks and Fallowfield, just west of the station, where the lights and gates have also malfunctioned.

So maybe they will man it around the clock indefinitely.

But surely this is a bit of political theatre. The answer is not to have a repairman available at a moment's notice. The answer is to fix the wonky signals so they work properly in the first place.

Honestly, how hard can it be? It's not a spaceship about to launch to Mars. It's lights and arms and bells that go ding-ding at the right time. Are these guys not in the railway business? Do they not have hundreds of these things across Canada?

There is an eye-opening lesson here about political tone, as well.

Jim Watson is sometimes too nice for the city's own good. He does not give the impression of a politician who, when all else fails, is capable of kicking butts across the room. And do it when people are watching. It is not a terrible thing to instil a little fear among other tribal leaders.

"I let it be known to our city manager that I was fed up with what was happening in the Barrhaven area and I wanted a solution," the Citizen reported the mayor's reaction on Saturday.

A little lame. I'm sure they're quaking in their boots at Via headquarters.

The problem with being conciliatory all the time, addicted to harmony - and showing up at too many bake sales and pancake breakfasts - is that, when a big problem arises, you will be told to take a number, then asked to be "reasonable" about your demands. Watson may be a nicer guy than Baird, but Baird is a craftier politician. Why? Because he knows the value, with proper timing, of going ballistic.

Rail signals dogged by more glitches.

Two more signal snafus occurred Monday morning at Ottawa railway crossings, days after politicians demanded Via Rail fix similar problems nearby.

Since Friday, Via has had workers watching three Fallowfield-area crossings, ready to report and inspect signal problems.

But it was two other crossings at Jockvale and Strandherd roads where problems occurred Monday. Technicians were sent to investigate why the railway's warning devices had gone into fail-safe mode, when barriers or lights activate when a train isn't there.

The pair of problems were at least the 10th and 11th reported at Ottawa rail crossings since last September.

Unlike Monday's problems, some have happened close to the site of last year's fatal crash between a passenger train and an OC Transpo double-decker bus that killed six people.

The tragedy makes the community more sensitive to rail glitches, Mayor Jim Watson has said.

"Even with the added attention, he said, the volume of problems seems high.

We're fortunate that no one has been killed or injured as a result of these malfunctions,"

Watson said Monday. "The problem has to get fixed."

Via spokeswoman Mylène Bélanger said safety is Via's top concern. She did not give an update on Monday's investigation.

Last week, a fix to the signal problems was demanded by Watson and Ottawa West-Nepean MP John Baird.

Via had said on Friday it would have a staff member in the area 24/7 until the issue was resolved.

So far, that hasn't been enough for Watson or Baird.

"I'm not satisfied because the problem isn't fixed," Watson said. "I'll be satisfied when the problem's fixed."

Baird, who demanded on Friday that the signal malfunctions be fixed within a week, said he was disappointed to see more problems Monday.

Spokesman Adam Hodge said Baird is "tremendously frustrated" and is working with Transport Minister Lisa Raitt to "hold Via's feet to the fire" to get the issues fixed.

Time for Via to level with us on crossing malfunctions

Via Rail has suggested that the growing fury over the malfunctioning railway crossing signals is about emotions running high after last fall's tragic accident. Or it's the media stirring things up. And that's when the railway line admits to any problems - usually it claims everything is just swell.

Take this past Tuesday evening, for example. Councillors received an email at 5:22 p.m. from one of the city's traffic managers informing them that the railway crossing signals were not working properly at the Greenbank Road crossing. "Via Rail have been notified and are co-ordinating repair efforts," said the email. Almost an hour later, another city employee emailed council that Via told them the crossing was clear at 6:10 p.m. Except that's not what Barrhaven Coun. Jan Harder heard from a resident at an open house she was attending. The resident told the exasperated councillor that at 6:24 p.m. the signals were still wonky. To make matters worse, when Citizen reporter Carys Mills contacted Via Wednesday morning to ask about the incident, the only reply from the rail company's spokeswoman was that "the situations did not occurred (sic)."

On Wednesday evening, a train travelling west crossed the tracks at Greenbank Road while the security arm was still up. Aghast drivers sent photos. The eventual (and almost incomprehensible) answer from Via that it turned out the Greenbank crossing signal was out of service a day earlier and that all procedures were being followed to a T.

Via's emailed statement: "100% normal situation and occurs on a regular basis at all crossings."

And it's this sort of arrogant response that's the most maddening part of this entire signal malfunction debacle that's gained speed over the past few months. It is bad enough that, in the months since the fatal crash between an OC Transpo bus and a Via Rail train, south-end residents have endured inconvenience and a fair amount of worry from at least a dozen of these types of incidents. But it's completely unacceptable that the Crown corporation would so callously dismiss the community's first-hand experiences as either non-existent or a usual occurrence that we shouldn't worry our pretty little heads about.

Via may be right that we have a heightened sense of safety issues since the Sept. 18 crash in which six died. And why shouldn't we?

It's important to remember that according to all reports - including one by the Transportation Safety Board - all rail crossing signals were working properly at the site of the fateful accident. But it's understandable that we're all paying more attention to issues like railway crossings in the months following the crash.

And because you've been paying more attention, and telling us in the media about the problems you're seeing, we've been reporting more of those malfunctions. It's hard to see how this is bad, except maybe for Via, which two years ago spent \$16 million on the track that runs through Barrhaven, including significant improvements to the level crossing warning systems. (How's that working out?)

Reporters call Via each day in vain for detailed explanations on what's going on: Are all the malfunctions the same? What is it about the issue that's so tricky to fix? How does Via know when its signals malfunction and how does it let people know about it? All these questions, and yet, Via cannot make any of its technical employees available to speak to the media.

A number of people - here's looking at you, Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird - have opined that fixing crossing signals isn't rocket science. Perhaps. But it might be more complicated than it looks from the outside. So why doesn't Via send someone to Ottawa to explain to us?

Perhaps pressing Via for a technical briefing is something our civic leaders could work on together instead of the political posturing they've been indulging in during the past week. Baird, who's also the MP for Ottawa West-Nepean, last Friday demanded that Via have the signal problems fixed within a week. He understands that the after-effects of the crash are "still very raw in the community," which was deeply affected by the September accident. But the problems won't be fixed by Friday, and the minister flipping his fiery red lid over it won't make it so.

Mayor Jim Watson is also - extremely upset by these continued signal failures at Via crossings that are eroding public confidence in these crossings. - As he should be. But Watson is now goading Baird on Twitter and elsewhere about the minister's "promise" it wasn't a promise - to have everything fixed up by week's end.

When that doesn't happen come Friday, Watson shouldn't gloat, nor should Baird issue further threats. Instead they should bury whatever partisan issues they have, even temporarily, to figure out what it will take for a permanent solution to this crossing issue. Or at the very least, our politicians could make Via executives answer our questions. That modicum of respect is the least that Ottawans deserve.

Protective gates didn't lower for train

As a Via Rail train passed through Barrhaven on Wednesday afternoon, the railway's protective gates were not lowered, lights did not flash and bells did not sound.

As a Via Rail train passed through Barrhaven Wednesday afternoon, the railway's protective gates were not lowered. A worker dressed in orange watched the intersection.

A worker dressed in orange watched the intersection for part of the time, as the train moved slowly west, and the gates stayed raised.

A Via spokesman said the Greenbank Road incident was a "100 per cent normal situation and occurs on a regular basis at all crossings."

But it's the latest in a string of incidents witnessed by a community worried about safety around the tracks and a lack of information coming from Via.

"Why is the arm up? Why isn't it working?" asked Barrhaven Coun. Jan Harder. "That's the solution, to walk trains across tracks, across roads? That's not a solution."

For Harder and others in Barrhaven, frustration is mounting about more than a dozen reported signal malfunctions since last fall. The situation has the attention of Mayor Jim Watson and MP John Baird, who both ordered Via last week to fix the problem as soon as possible.

Since then, Via said Monday morning there had been a pair of signal glitches at two different crossings - at Jockvale and Strandherd roads - where the railway's warning devices stopped working normally for an unknown reason.

The devices, according to Via, went into fail-safe mode, meaning the barriers, sounds or lights were activated when a train wasn't there.

Then on Tuesday evening, a memo went out to councillors saying there had been a malfunction reported at the Greenbank Road. Another went out Wednesday morning saying there was a malfunction at the Fallowfield crossing, where it intersects with the Transitway, which is one of the three crossings where a Via worker has been on site to keep watch for issues since last week.

Initially on Wednesday, Via spokeswoman Mylène Bélanger contradicted the city's report and said there had been no Greenbank issue Tuesday.

"These situations did not occur ... It could be something else," Bélanger said.

But by late afternoon, once photos of Wednesday's incident were posted online, spokesman Jacques Gagnon responded, saying there had in fact been a problem there the day before at Greenbank. There's an order in place from Via's contractor RailTerm, instructing train crews to stop before a crossing and have a crew member get out to protect the crossing for some of the time it passes through, Gagnon said in an email.

The order was put in place Tuesday because an advanced warning device is out of service, he said, to make sure trains aren't accelerating or decelerating through the crossing while work is being done nearby at Jockvale Road.

Gagnon said it's a "normal situation." Others dispute that. "There is a major problem here in Barrhaven ... Via hasn't been able to tell us of any other place in Canada where there's been a similar circumstance," Harder said, adding she's glad there are temporary safety measures in place but that there needs to be a permanent solution.

"You absolutely have to live here to understand the pressure that this causes for this community," she said. "You're crossing tracks all day long (in Barrhaven). The level of angst that we have in this community, we need a solution and we need it fast."

During the time Via was saying nothing happened at Greenbank on Tuesday, Harder told reporters she witnessed cars crossing the tracks as the lights were flashing but the gates weren't down. Within minutes, she said, a train was crossing the tracks and was being led by an employee decked out in orange.

She said she's been telling students, seniors and other residents to report every issue they're seeing at the tracks, since she doesn't want people to become complacent.

She said she doesn't understand why there's been no answer on what's causing the issues.

"They're not pioneering Western Canada and the wild, wild west, OK? There are tools that should be available to them," Harder said. "They shouldn't be counting on the safety of the people I represent, based on those people paying extra attention and making the call and actually making so much effort."

Charles Bottomley, who was driving his three daughters home Wednesday around 3:35 p.m. when he approached the tracks, said he was alarmed to see a train pass with the gates up, while there were no flashing lights or sound.

"I don't trust it now," he said, adding he's been stuck at another malfunctioning crossing in the past week. "I think it's unbelievable they can't fix it ... I cross these tracks every day with my kids."

Being close to the scene of last fall's collision between an OC Transpo bus and train makes the situation even worse, he said.

"I know that wasn't Via's fault," he said. "It's just that of all the areas that they can't get this right, I don't think ironic is the right word. It's just not right."

City won't make buses stop at tracks

Mandatory stops would increase crash risk, study finds

The City of Ottawa will not compel transit buses to stop at all railway crossings automatically after an independent study suggested that doing so would increase the chances of a crash by as much as 17 per cent.

In the weeks after the tragic collision between an OC Transpo bus and a Via Rail train last September, many members of the public called for buses to be required to stop at all railway crossings as an additional safety measure.

Coun. Diane Deans, chair of Ottawa's transit committee, acknowledged that making all buses stop might seem ideal but underlined the need not to set policy on "gut feelings." Instead, the city hired MMM Group to review research on whether stopping at all rail crossings - even if the lights aren't flashing and the barrier isn't down - would increase safety.

On Wednesday afternoon, the consultants were emphatic that the evidence shows that requiring buses to stop at crossings even when they aren't active won't improve safety. Moreover, automatically stopping could increase the chances of a train hitting a vehicle; it would take a bus longer to cross the tracks from a standstill.

"The time required to completely traverse and clear an at-grade crossing represents an unavoidable period of exposure to the risk of collision with a train," according to the MMM report.

"The longer this period of exposure, the greater the likelihood that a train may arrive while the vehicle has entered and not yet completely cleared the crossing ... exposure periods are longer when vehicles must stop before entering and clearing a crossing."

In addition, the report said buses stopping at crossings could cause vehicles to crash into the rear end of the buses.

The Transportation Safety Board, which is investigating the Sept. 18 crash in which six people died, will also make recommendations about whether buses should stop at all crossings.

OC Transpo boss John Manconi said that, depending on what's in the TSB report, the city could revisit this policy. Manconi was also at pains to say that keeping buses on schedule and saving money were not considerations when studying whether the buses should stop at every crossing.

MMM's recommendations appear largely - but not solely - based on a 1985 report published by the U.S. Federal Highway Administration, which is one of the few studies that quantifies the safety implications of required stopping.

Although the data is almost 30 years old, MMM Group's Geoffrey Millen contended that "from a technical standpoint, it (the study) is very rigorous. They used a large amount of data, all the data has been validated ... we're comfortable in stating that we'd expect to see the same type of results for here in Ottawa."

The MMM Group also reviewed all 20 OC Transpo-railway intersections and recommended that the gated crossings - where a barrier or arm is lowered when a train is approaching - be installed at the six Ottawa crossings that are protected by flashing signals only. No OC Transpo bus routes traverse unprotected crossings.

The city plans to install gated crossings at four of the six intersections - Herzberg, Lester, March, and McCarthy roads. It will also review how best to serve customers who ride a once-a-week bus that travels over tracks at Carp Road and Donald B. Munro.

Police called in over rail signal woes.

Federal transport minister suspects more than 'technical malfunctions'

The ongoing saga of Via Rail's malfunctioning crossing signals in Barrhaven took a mysterious turn Thursday when Transport Minister Lisa Raitt called for police to investigate the problem.

It appears that vandalism is now being considered as at least one possible cause of the dozen or so signal malfunctions that have occurred in the south Ottawa community since the fatal crash of an OC Transpo bus and Via Rail passenger train last September.

Last Friday, Via Rail announced it would staff the three rail crossings with the most problems - Woodroffe, Fallowfield and the Transitway - around the clock until the problems were resolved.

Sources close to the issue told the Citizen that soon after the Via Rail staff person began the on-site monitoring, the staffer saw an undetermined number of people (anywhere from one to three) around one of the controllers. When the staffer went to speak to the others, the people at the controller ran off.

"Earlier today, Minister Raitt asked VIA to call in the Ottawa Police and CN Rail police requesting them to open an investigation," according to an email from the transport minister's press secretary, Jana Regimbal.

A late-evening release from Via Rail confirmed that it "will ask the Ottawa Police to open an inquiry on these recent incidents."

However, CN Rail had yet to hear of the request to help investigate and spokeswoman Lindsay Fedchyshyn told the Citizen the company believes "this section of track ... is owned by Via, so CN Police, I can't imagine how they would be involved."

Over the past few weeks, Via Rail and Transport Canada have been examining a series of signal malfunctions at railway crossings in Ottawa in recent months.

"Through this process, some information has been attained which leads the government, VIA and Transport to suspect that technical malfunctions may not be the only reason for the current rash of problems," said Regimbal.

In recent weeks, Regimbal said, Via and Transport Canada have "exhaustingly examined all potential scenarios for what may be causing these problems."

In addition to asking police authorities to get involved, Regimbal said, Raitt has asked VIA and Transport to send a team of three employees at all three crossings to monitor and ensure the public is safe at all time. They will remain there until this matter is firmly resolved.

Via Rail's statement explained the supervision in a slightly different way:

"Personnel will be stationed at these (six) locations in order to provide supplementary support to automatic warning devices including ensuring that motorists and pedestrians stop at each crossing."

The Fallowfield crossings that will be receiving the extra attention include Woodroffe Avenue, the Transitway, Fallowfield Road, Greenbank Road, Jockvale Road and Strandherd Road.

According to Via Rail, "trains will be operating at reduced speed at each of the six crossings ... As a result, longer traffic stops and longer activation of automatic warning devices at these crossings can be expected. This temporary measure will also cause some train delays."

The Crown corporation is also in discussions with the City of Ottawa about the possibility of installing cameras at the crossings.

Raitt's press secretary Regimbal note the "unusual number of malfunctions at the Fallowfield crossing in Barrhaven" started particularly being noticed after the Sept. 18 fatal crash in the area.

There were no signal issues involved in the tragic accident, but the event has made many people in the Barrhaven area more aware of safety issues. Since the fall, there have been about a dozen reported signal glitches at Ottawa crossings, sometimes involving fail-safe mode. The mode means lights, sounds and barriers are activated when no train is present because there's an issue somewhere on the railway.

Friday 11/04/2014 Ottawa Citizen

Smiths Falls

Fallowfield Road

MPS call for action on Barrhaven rail problems.

Malfunctions at railway crossings in Barrhaven have prompted the federal government to call in the police. The Citizen's CARYS MILLS asks a rail expert explain what is going wrong.

Politicians had been ordering Via Rail to sort out Barrhaven's rail woes for more than a week before the federal government asked for the police to be called in Thursday.

To better understand what Transport Minister Lisa Raitt calls an "unusual number of malfunctions," the Citizen asked a rail expert about how signals should work at railways.

London, Ont. rail expert Richard Plokhaar explains:

How should railway signals work?

A track has circuits. At some point before a crossing, when you occupy the track with your train, you shortcut a circuit so the railroad crossing will "'close." Closed means that the barriers come down, the red lights will flash and the bells ring.

How can it go wrong?

A track circuit can break pretty easily. If there's a thunderstorm with lightning, that might affect that track circuit ... What might have happened over the last winter was there was too much salt on the roads, so those track circuits got deregulated and they need to be reset. Or there could be a bug in the system - the whole circuit is connected and an issue could be hard to find - whether it's old equipment that's buggy and needs replacing or something else.

So one piece of faulty equipment could mess up more than one crossing?

Oh yeah. Imagine you had one mile or kilometre of track with five crossings on it, you have a bug in one of the track circuits, all those five crossings that are in that section will be closed as if a train is coming. They're all interconnected if you have the crossings close together.

So what is 'fail-safe mode'?

Whatever caused a failure, the crossing should go into safe mode. This is a specific technical term used in aviation, railways and other industries. It's how to make something safe if it fails. If someone broke something at a crossing, the crossing would go down and it will stay closed " because it failed somewhere.

There was a situation this week at Greenbank Road's tracks where the crossing did not close when a train came through. What was happening?

I watched a video of the situation that starts the moment the train starts accelerating. The train was really slow and they had flagged the crossing - that's a railway term for making sure that you know a railway crossing is not working ... It gets turned off because you don't want to have it closed indefinitely, so they tell the crews to stop at the crossing, and secure it.

How does that work?

A crew member has to get out " it's an official rule " to stop the traffic. Then you get back in your cab and you continue the track. It's nothing of concern, it's a normal operation.

Do you think we have more rail issues in Barrhaven than elsewhere? Are we being overly sensitive?

It might be a combination. I don't know if the amount of defects is normal because we don't have the statistics. It might be that there's a bug in the system there that's hard to find for the rail owner. They might be struggling with that - they might be really busy, wondering what the heck is going wrong. That's painful and it's not something signal technicians do on purpose. But it's up to Via Rail to explain that. People are writing to the newspapers, the mayor's busy with it, and the councillors and members of Parliament - so you don't need the data for it, it's already too many.

Are you concerned?

With a fail safe, it's just a disturbance, a delay. That's absolutely fine. My biggest concern is that people get so upset that they don't obey the rules any more. They get so frustrated, it becomes high risk. No one is taking care to inform the public properly. The public is going to behave irrationally and will cross even when there's a train coming.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Fear and loathing in Barrhaven

Crossing gate nearly lands on roof of car in latest Via signal malfunction

The day after police were called in to investigate the possibility of vandalism at the Via Rail crossings in Barrhaven, less than 24 hours after additional staff were put in place at six crossings to provide additional security, the gate at the Woodroffe Avenue level rail crossing almost smashed into the top of a car.

So much for having the signal malfunction fixed in a week. And so much for the people of Barrhaven feeling a little safer about travelling over the railway tracks. It was about 2:30 on Friday afternoon when an eastbound Via Rail train sat just west of where Woodroffe Avenue crosses the railway tracks. Sadly, the nearby transitway crossing is known to all of us as the site of the tragic crash between an OC Transpo bus and a passenger train last fall. But, just like on the day of the accident, the automated signal system seemed to be working just fine.

The bells sounded. Red lights started flashing. Two gates automatically lowered to keep the north and southbound Woodroffe traffic from proceeding. Two men in fluorescent orange vests walk to each side of the road. This last part is a very recent addition to the safety routine. Since the accident last fall, there has been a series of crossing signal malfunctions.

In the past few weeks, they seem to have increased in frequency. Under political pressure - and an eventual order from Transport Canada - Via Rail has stationed workers at six level crossings in Barrhaven to - provide supplementary support - to the automatic equipment.

The train crawled through the crossing, reduced speed being another of the temporary measures Via Rail announced late Thursday while the signal issues were being sorted out. Indeed, the order to slow trains through Barrhaven might be delaying Toronto-Ottawa trips by half an hour.

The train passed, the gates rose and the Woodroffe traffic started to move across the tracks. All good.

Except that the bells were still going. That seemed wrong. And after a few seconds, the gates came back down as cars were crossing the tracks. Thankfully, the gates didn't actually hit the roofs of any vehicles, although it sure looked close. Barrhaven residents reported the same sort of incident as having occurred the previous evening at the Greenbank crossing.

As the public outcry over these malfunctions has grown louder over the past few weeks, Via Rail has reminded us that "at no time was public safety compromised." This is generally true. While it's hard to know the exact nature of each malfunction - Via Rail either cannot or would rather not share the details - whatever is causing the problem is triggering the system's "fail-safe mode," where the lights flash and the gates come down even when no train is approaching. It's inconvenient and it's confusing. But we'd rather additional safety precautions than not enough.

But the possibility of a gate coming down on the top of your car doesn't seem particularly safe, either. And the incident goes a long way to explaining why the people of Barrhaven are justifiably nervous about crossing the railway tracks.

Indeed, Barrhavenites must surely traverse railway tracks more than any other residents in Ottawa.

There are six crossings in the Barrhaven area - Woodroffe, the Transitway, Fallowfield, Greenbank, Jockvale and Strandherd - which means pretty much everyone who lives there has to cross at the track once or twice a day. Usually more. The train even crosses a multi-use pathway, where it's necessary to have a mini-gate system to block the way of joggers and dog walkers and schoolchildren when a train is coming.

One might wonder at the wisdom (not to mention the political interference) that went into planning a community with such a multitude of railway crossings, especially in an area where building grade-separated crossings is almost prohibitively expensive. But that's another story and beside the point. Today, 85,000 people live in Barrhaven and they deserve to feel as safe as the rest of us.

They do not. You can see it in the way they approach a crossing. They slow down and hesitate, drivers and their passengers looking both ways along the track. Just in case. What if this is the time that the gates don't come down when the train is on its way?

Sure, some of this nervousness may come from a heightened sense of worry regarding crossing because of the Sept. 18 crash that killed six people and injured many more, most of them from the Barrhaven community. It's natural that the residents who were so personally affected by the tragedy continue to feel the after effects of it.

But a lot of their concern comes from the very real malfunctions, the types that see a gate almost smash into a car roof. Add to that a possibility that the security system has been tampered with.

Late last week, a Via Rail worker saw three people around one of the control boxes.

When the worker approached, the others ran off. Ottawa police are now investigating. So are the people of Barrhaven a little nervous? You bet. They have every reason to be.

Tuesday

15/04/2014

Ottawa Citizen

Smiths Falls

Fallowfield Road

New lights to warn buses at crossing.

Amber beacon to be set up near crash site

The city wants a continuously flashing amber beacon atop a railway warning sign on the northbound Transitway, close to the site of last fall's fatal crash between a bus and train.

The warning should be installed and working by May 15, according to a report going to Ottawa's transit commission on Wednesday.

Following the crash, which killed six people, the federal Transportation Safety Board began investigating. The probe is ongoing, but after initial findings were released, the city hired engineering firm CIMA+ to look at aspects of Transitway safety, including the feasibility of an advance warning light.

The firm recommended the warning sign and light be installed on the northbound curve toward the tracks, the same direction the bus was travelling before the collision.

As bus drivers leave Fallowfield Station now, they see a railway warning sign about 130 metres before the crossing.

The new sign will be earlier, 210 metres in advance of the railway crossing, which has its own warning system with a safety gate and red warning lights.

The new sign will have a flashing light to get extra attention. "These beacons provide a heightened emphasis to the warning message," the firm said in its report. Part of the rationale for the enhanced warning was the "uniqueness of the Transitway" and tracks being "immediately after a long curve."

The city's public works department and Via Rail agreed with the firm's recommendations, according to the city report. The firm is still studying whether there should be a similar warning on the straight, southbound approach to the tracks, and whether there should be a speed limit reduction. After the collision, the city reduced the speed from 60 km/h to 50 km/h.

In the same report, the city said it has now established procedures, including public communication, with Via Rail to ensure safety when there's a railway-crossing malfunction. The city did not release the procedure when requested Monday.

There was no signal malfunction at the time of the fatal crash. But since then there has been a rash of reported signal malfunctions in Barrhaven. However, the flashing beacon is continuous, so it won't need to be connected to the railway's warning system, the consultant's report notes.

The latest recommendation is on top of earlier measures taken by the city.

Bus-rail meetings make us nervous.

In a week during which there was plenty of news about at-grade railway crossings - all of it bad - the city indicated it's sticking with its policy of not requiring OC Transpo buses to stop automatically at all crossings. It was a bold move. Since the Sept. 18 crash between an OC Transpo bus and a Via Rail passenger train in which six people were killed, many members of the public have called for public transit buses to be required to stop at all railway crossings, at all times. Although everyone agrees that all the railway security features were working fine the day of the tragic crash - witnesses reported the lights were flashing and the gates were down, facts confirmed later by the Transportation Safety Board - making buses stop at every crossing is still seen by some as an extra security measure.

City officials understand the sentiment. Even though neither federal regulations nor the provincial Highway Traffic Act require stopping at each crossing, intuitively, it seems as though automatic stopping would be safer for buses.

But intuition isn't always right. Nor should it be the basis of public policy. Instead, the city quietly hired (and why quietly is anyone's guess) MMM Group to undertake an independent review of the evidence out there on whether stopping automatically at crossings is actually safer.

Just to be clear, we obviously expect all vehicles to stop when lights are flashing, bells are ringing, and barriers are down. (No OC Transpo routes traverse crossings that are completely unprotected.) What's currently under discussion is whether buses should stop even when no warning signals are engaged, a situation referred to in the transportation world as "non-active."

And the answer is a very resounding No.

According to MMM Group's research of existing data, requiring buses to stop at all crossings actually increases the likelihood of an accident between a train and a passenger bus by 17.4 per cent. Now, that's a 17 per cent increase of a small number, thank goodness - one of the problems researching this question is that there are so few accident statistics to draw from - but clearly we don't want to heighten the chances of an accident. Even so, we should give the city credit for setting policy that goes against public opinion, which is no easy task. Still, there are several serious issues the transit commission needs to consider when it meets Wednesday to discuss MMM Group's report.

First is the age of the data used in the study, most of which dates back 30 years.

The "seminal" quantitative research looking specifically at this issue was funded and published by the U.S. Federal Highway Administration in 1985.

In an official city briefing with councillors and media last week (which occurred before the report was released, making it difficult to ask detailed questions), MMM Group's Geoffrey Millen contended that "from a technical standpoint, (the study) is very rigorous. They used a large amount of data, all the data has been validated. Fair enough.

But technology has changed in the past three decades. The transit bus of 1985 isn't the bus of today. More recent research would be reassuring, and that research should be funded by Transport Canada, perhaps in conjunction with its U.S. counterpart to reflect the current North American experience.

And then there's the timing of the city's report. More than once, Millen referred to the fact that stopping at all railway crossings, even when they weren't active, wasn't safer, as long as the warning devices were working properly. But as we know, the warning signals at a number of crossings in Barrhaven are malfunctioning on a regular basis. That's why residents are taking it upon themselves to stop - or at least slow down significantly - before they drive across the tracks. Who can blame them?

So until the signal issues in Ottawa are fixed and complete confidence in the safety of these intersections is restored, many will remain skeptical that buses should not automatically stop at all crossings, no matter what the 30-year-old data shows.

Police end Via Rail crossing probe

Malfunctions at seven southwest Ottawa railway crossings weren't the result of tampering, Ottawa police said Wednesday as they announced that their investigation into possible mischief had ended less than a week after it began.

Police said they'd found "no damage or mischief to any of the rail equipment" while investigating with Via Rail police.

Officers were called in last Thursday at the suggestion of federal Transport Minister Lisa Raitt after a week of growing political pressure federally and municipally for Via to fix what Raitt called a "rash of problems" in Barrhaven.

Via spokesman Jacques C. Gagnon said Thursday that staff watching three of the problematic crossings had thought they'd seen people trying to "toy with the equipment." But that now appears unrelated to frequent reports by commuters of crossings frequently going into fail-safe mode, which means lights, gates and warning bells sounding when no train is approaching.

"We are deploying all available resources," Gagnon said, adding there are "dozens" of staff working on the issues. "We are really working very hard to find out about the possible glitches."

The situation is particularly concerning to Barrhaven residents because of last fall's collision there between a bus and train on the Transitway, which killed six people on the bus. There was no signal glitch on the day of the crash; the reports of persistent malfunctions began afterward.

The week before calling in the police, Via stationed staff around the clock at three of the crossings with the most issues: Woodroffe, Fallowfield and the Transitway. When police were called in last week, Via said staff would be stationed at six crossings to help with warnings and to make sure drivers were stopping at the crossings. External experts, including a group from California, are now being consulted, along with the regular maintenance contractor, RailTerm, Gagnon said.

"There are multiple moving parts. It's very complex. We don't know. If it was simple, we would have resolved this a long time ago," Gagnon said. "There's a number of technical (possibilities): sensors, switches, warning lights, barriers ... ground work."

The railway system's automatic warning devices - which include sound, lights and gates - are sensitive because their activation relies on the track's circuit working properly, Gagnon said.

When the system is working properly, warnings should be activated when a train travels over part of the track as it approaches the crossing. But when there's a problem somewhere, the system goes into fail-safe mode, meaning the warnings turn on and remain on until they're turned off by staff investigating the problem. The issue in Ottawa is trying to find where the problem is.

Via also warned on Thursday that work will be done at six crossings over the next two weeks. Gagnon said the work isn't tied to the ending of the police investigation and that it isn't because Via has found the problem.

"It's like owning a house and having to do regular maintenance ... we're doing the regular maintenance and prevention and tests," he said, adding there haven't been any malfunctions this week that he's aware of.

Work will be done at Woodroffe Avenue, the Transitway, Fallowfield Road, Greenbank Road, Jockvale Road and Strandherd Drive - six of the crossings investigated by police, who also looked at Merivale Road.

Safety will be ensured and impact on traffic will be minimized, according to the Crown corporation.

Gagnon said work was done Wednesday at Woodroffe Avenue and at Fallowfield Road, where there was cleaning and testing of some equipment. On Thursday, he said, Greenbank Road's protective gate on the south side will be replaced and tested.

He said everything possible was being done to "make sure the situation in Ottawa is brought to a normal level of activities."

Via also reminded people to obey railway signals at all times.

City updates safety procedures for bus-rail crossings

Almost seven months after the fatal Barrhaven bus-train crash, the city's transit commission has received five observations. A sign warning bus drivers of the railway crossing ahead, with a continuously flashing amber light atop it, will go on the northbound Transitway 210 metres before the tracks. There's an existing sign, without a light, 130 metres before the tracks. "Because of the curve, just in advance of the crossing travelling in the northbound direction, extra emphasis in this particular case is warranted," said consultant Chris Philp, an engineer with firm CIMA+, which was hired to study Transitway safety.

NO NEW LIGHT

But Philp said there's no need for one on the southbound Transitway approach to the tracks. That stretch doesn't curve or have any other issues that require an advanced warning, whether it's a continuously flashing beacon or other advanced warning systems tied to the railway, which were studied as options.

SPEED

Another issue looked at by Philp was whether the bus drivers should slow down on the Transitway. After the crash, the city reduced the speed limit in the area to 50 kilometres an hour from 60 km/h. Philp said either speed would be appropriate. But after looking at speed data, he suggested sticking with 50 km/h, as long as the city keeps monitoring the appropriate speed. "There's really no compelling reason that should be changed at this time," he said.

DON'T STOP

The city is maintaining its policy of not having OC Transpo buses stop at railway crossings if no train is coming and no signals are active. Drivers slow down and prepare to stop if they see an oncoming train. But following the crash, there were questions about whether drivers should stop automatically at all railways, as they do in Toronto and Montreal. "Most people think that stopping and then starting again would be safer - that's actually not the case," said commission chair Diane Deans. She said it might be time for the Canadian government to conduct its own study, since the consultant who studied the Ottawa issue relied on U.S. data from 1985. "Having a more current scan would be beneficial," Deans said.

TALK IT OUT

There was no signal malfunction at the time of the fatal Barrhaven bus-train crash in September. But after that there has been a rash of reported signal malfunctions in Barrhaven. Following up on the TSB's observations, the city has a new policy with Via Rail to "better ensure safe operations during railway malfunctions," which includes communications between Via and city staff, and with the public and councillors. After 311 gets a call about a malfunction, traffic services and public works are notified, and a city traffic management inspector becomes the government's main contact and is the person who liaises with Via.

Friday 18/04/2014 Ottawa Citizen Smiths Falls Fallowfield Road

Via Rail agrees to meet over signal woes.

At the request of Mayor Jim Watson, Via Rail will hold a technical briefing at City Hall next week to explain the ongoing issues with crossing signals malfunctioning in the Barrhaven area.

"I think you will agree that there has been a failure to communicate key facts to the public in a timely manner about these failures," Watson wrote in a letter dated April 11 to Via's interim president and chief executive Steve Del Bosco. "This has exacerbated the public's loss of confidence in these rail crossings."

The mayor wanted Del Bosco "to personally intervene" and commit to hosting a technical briefing in Ottawa, suggesting that a briefing "would be the most effective medium for engaging with the public, media and members of Council on the safety and technical issues raised over the course of the last few days."

According to the letter, Ottawa's senior staff have been urging Via's management team to hold such a meeting.

According to Watson's office, Del Bosco agreed on Thursday afternoon to hold the briefing next week.

There have been more than a dozen signal malfunctions at a number of Barrhaven crossings since the fall, the frequency of which seems to be increasing of late. Just last week, the Citizen witnessed a gate coming down on a car "narrowly missing the roof" well after the train had passed.

There has been heightening sensitivity at rail crossings in the Barrhaven area ever since the Sept. 18 crash between an OC Transpo bus and Via train, in which six people died. Even though the signals and gates were working properly at the site of the fatal crash - where the train crosses the transitway adjacent to Woodroffe Avenue - the tragic event would naturally make people in the area a little extra attentive about rail crossings.

But the malfunctions are making many motorists in Barrhaven downright nervous.

Via has taken some steps to assure the public, including reducing the speed the train travels through the community and using flagmen at six Barrhaven crossings, measures put in place after Transport Minister Lisa Raitt intervened in the file. She also called for Ottawa police to investigate a suspicious incident in which three individuals were seen near one of the controller boxes, but police have since reported they found no evidence of tampering.

In his letter, Watson also reminded Del Bosco of Via's promise "on April 1 to permanently repair these crossings within four weeks."

Tuesday 22/04/2014 Ottawa Citizen Smiths Falls Fallowfield Road

Via Rail webpage updates residents on signals.

Via Rail has created an online hub of information for frustrated Barrhaven residents dealing with railway-signal malfunctions and track work.

The Crown corporation has also said it would hold a public briefing this week in response to a written request by Mayor Jim Watson, in which he said there had been "a failure to communicate key facts to the public in a timely manner about these failures."

Watson's letter was released on Thursday by his office. But on Monday, Via Rail spokeswoman Mylène Bélanger said the date for the briefing still hadn't been determined.

But after weeks of frustration over little information coming from Via, Bélanger said Monday there is now a webpage (viarail.ca/en/aboutvia-rail/information-ottawaarea-residents) with updates for Ottawa residents.

The page outlines work being done at railway crossings on Woodroffe Avenue, the Transitway, Fallowfield Road, Greenbank Road, Jockvale Road and Strandherd Drive.

Via also explains precautions in place until the source of the malfunctions is found, including train speeds being reduced through Barrhaven and flagmen being posted at the crossings.

Since last fall, there have been more than a dozen reported malfunctions in Barrhaven, where there's increased concern after last September's fatal bus-train collision. There were no signal issues at the time of the crash.

On the website, there are tips for reporting issues and explanations of railway lingo.

"Have you seen this picture?" accompanies a resident's photo of a train passing through Barrhaven earlier this month and the gates of the crossing were up. Via explains the policy is to have the train stop first, then a crew member gets out to watch and secure the crossing before the train slowly moves through.

The police found no foul play in the frequent malfunctions. Via is investigating.

Tuesday 22/04/2014 Ottawa Citizen Smiths Falls Fallowfield Road

Via crossing tests to be done this week.

Monday night to Tuesday morning:

All six crossings are tested, which may activate the crossing's warning devices (lights, gates and sounds). Flagmen will be at the crossings.

Tuesday night to Wednesday morning: Greenbank Road's gate will be changed and warning devices will be tested.

Wednesday night to Thursday morning: Woodroffe Avenue and Fallowfield Road crossings will have work done on their gates in the road medians, which will require temporary lane reductions overnight.

Thursday night to Friday morning:

All crossings will be tested, which could activate warning devices, so flagmen will be on site.

Four train crossings return to normal.

Safety orders still in effect at 2 others

Four of the six malfunctioning railway crossing signals in Barrhaven have received the all-clear from Transport Canada - but the public still has no explanation of what caused persistent problems at the sites in recent months.

Some of those answers may come Friday, as executives from Via Rail and contractor RailTerm face councillors at city hall. Via has agreed to provide a "technical briefing" on the signal glitches.

The mayor, councillors and local members of Parliament have been calling on the Crown corporation to explain more than a dozen reported malfunctions since last fall. Transport Canada, the federal authority that imposed safety orders on six crossings two weeks ago, did not say exactly what findings made it lift orders at four crossings Wednesday, while keeping orders at two other crossings in place.

The lifting of orders at the Fallowfield Road, Greenbank Road, Jockvale Road and Strandherd Drive crossings allowed Via to end extra safety precautions at those crossings as of 7 p.m. Thursday.

Trains went back to their regular speeds there, following a two-week slowdown that began with Transport Canada's orders - a response to warning barriers, lights and sounds that had been activated for unknown reasons when trains weren't coming. Flagmen no longer need to be stationed permanently at those crossings.

After monitoring Via's recent response, including extra maintenance and testing at the crossings, the federal government has become satisfied the company is "maintaining the safety of railway operations" at the four crossings, said Transport Canada spokeswoman Silvia Di Tiero.

But at the Transitway and Woodroffe Avenue crossings, Transport Canada is not satisfied. Safety orders will remain "until the issues are under control and the immediate threat is resolved," said Di Tiero, who did not answer questions about whether the source of malfunctions has been found at the four cleared crossings. Via spokesman Jacques C. Gagnon said some answers will be available when engineering firms retained by Via - Siemens and Hatch Mott MacDonald - issue a report next week.

"Let's wait for the final report to be tabled," Gagnon said, adding it will be made public.

Asked if the reason for frequent fail-safe-mode activations - the railway term for warnings going off when no train is present because there's an issue somewhere on the track - had been found at four crossings, Gagnon said "No stone was left unturned."

"As for the other two crossings, we're still keeping a close eye and we'll make some progress, for sure," he said. "The good news is that nothing has happened in the past two weeks."

He noted the two remaining crossings are close to the site of last fall's bus-train crash that killed six people. There were no signal malfunctions at the time of the crash but the tragedy has increased community sensitivity to safety issues around the tracks.

"We understand the sensitivity," Gagnon said.

Transport Minister Lisa Raitt's office did not respond to questions Thursday about some safety orders being lifted.

When the orders were issued, Raitt had also requested the police be called in to investigate possible tampering. But Ottawa police said last week they had found no foul play.

Saturday 26/04/2014 Ottawa Citizen

Smiths Falls

Fallowfield Road

Railway officials say 'perfect storm' of factors caused signal malfunctions.

OTTAWA "A perfect storm of factor" from an accumulation of road salt and other debris in the rails to vibrations from train wheels - appears to have caused the series of railway crossing malfunctions in Barrhaven that have left residents and politicians fuming and rail officials scratching their heads.

That was the main take-away from a long-awaited technical briefing Friday at city hall led by representatives from Via Rail and RailTerm, the company tasked with maintaining the half-dozen crossings in question. They were represented by Steve Del Bosco, Via's interim president and chief executive, Marc Beaulieu, Via's chief of transport and regional general manager for Eastern Canada, and Aaron Branston, vice-president of engineering and maintenance of RailTerm, the contractor that operates and maintains the railway crossing signals.

Mayor Jim Watson, councillors Jan Harder, Keith Egli, Allan Hubley, and senior city staff were also on hand.

A study by independent engineers will be delivered next week and is expected to answer even more questions. But in the meantime, here's what we know so far. How should railway signals work?

A track has circuits. As a train approaches a crossing, it shortcuts a circuit so the railroad crossing will "close." Closed means that the barriers come down, the red lights flash and the bells ring.

What's the problem?

There are actually three key reasons for the signal malfunctions, and they just happen to be occurring all at once.

First, the track ballast structure - that is, the stone that supports the rails - has been compromised in some spots by excess water accumulation, road salt and debris this winter, and that has caused the system to fall out of calibration.

Second, excess vibration from the train wheels on the tracks is causing the gates to re-engage after a train has already passed.

And finally, electrical interference from nearby power lines has caused sporadic issues.

But we live in Canada, where road salt is as much a part of winter as hockey and tobogganing. Why has this caused so much trouble in Barrhaven this year?

That's the key question and the one officials struggled the most to answer on Friday. They said Barrhaven is unique because it features a series of crossings within a short distance and a highly-populated area, perhaps hinting that we hear about them more because road users are inconvenienced by them more often.

They also blamed brutal winter weather and the fact that some power lines adjacent to crossings have been carrying a higher-than-normal level of power recently.

"It was a matter of everything happening all at the same time," Beaulieu said.

What is RailTerm doing to fix the problem?

The company has recalibrated the system where necessary and made other technical changes, as well as improved drainage and hired an outside electrical expert to advise it on the interference issues. It is also stepping up signal and track inspections and developing a system that will send automatic alerts to the rail control office whenever the crossings are engaged so it can dispatch workers as needed (currently, problems are reported by rail staff, OC Transpo drivers and members of the public).

RailTerm is also replacing signage to make emergency numbers more visible and adding signage in some places, so people know what to do in the event of an emergency.

Via blames Transpo for new crossing issues.

Two buses failed to stop far enough back, railway says

Via Rail says there have been two recent incidents in which OC Transpo buses failed to stop on time at rail crossings - and that one of them caused Monday night's signal problem at the Fallowfield Road crossing.

Coun. Diane Deans, chair of the transit commission, said the city and OC Transpo are investigating the incidents, which they first learned about through a Via Rail news release Tuesday.

"This was a surprise to us," Deans said. "We need to investigate and see if there is any merit to these claims."

In a statement, Via Rail said an OC Transpo bus approaching the crossing around 7 p.m. stopped beyond the stop line and under the gate as it was being lowered, damaging the gate. The crossing's warning lights were flashing, indicating an approaching train.

That damaged the gate and triggered so-called fail-safe mode, Via said. But fail-safe mode - the railway term for lights flashing and bells ringing when no train is present - remained in effect afterward. A technician was dispatched and fixed the problem within about an hour, Via said.

Via also said that on Friday an OC Transpo bus failed to stop at the appropriate line while warning lights were flashing.

In light of the two occurrences, Via Rail's interim chief executive, Steve Del Bosco, has written to Mayor Jim Watson and OC Transpo general manager John Manconi, asking that "the city investigate these incidents and take appropriate measures to avoid their re-occurrence," the Via statement said.

City council passed a bylaw amendment last week formally requiring buses to stop at railway crossings when warning signals are flashing, indicating an approaching train.

Deans said the city and OC Transpo are looking into the incidents and that the city manager has requested a meeting with Del Bosco on Wednesday. The signal issues have been happening for months, but Deans said Via Rail had never before suggested signal problems had been caused by an OC Transpo bus.

"We need to be working on a relationship with Via Rail," she said. "It's not about us and them, it's about us working together to resolve this issue. Ultimately the people of Barrhaven want those signals fixed."

Police were directing traffic at the Fallowfield crossing Monday evening when the lights of the crossing were activated but the arms remained up. There have been more than a dozen reported malfunctions at railway crossings in Barrhaven since last fall, prompting local politicians to demand answers.

The mayor, speaking Tuesday morning before Via's statement, said the ongoing signal issues remain a concern for Barrhaven residents.

"We have to get to the root problem of this. Via has to find out what's going on, and we've got to ensure that this kind of activity stops, because it's eroding confidence in Via's system over there," he said.

Last week, Transport Canada lifted safety orders it had imposed at four of the six malfunctioning railway crossings, including the Fallowfield Road crossing. Two other crossings still have reduced speeds and flagmen permanently stationed there.

At a long-awaited technical briefing last week led by representatives from Via Rail and Railterm, its contractor that operates and maintains railway crossing signals, officials presented three key reasons for the signal malfunctions. First, the track ballast structure, the crushed stone that supports the rails, has been compromised in some spots by excess water accumulation, road salt and debris, causing the system to fall out of calibration.

Second, excess vibration from train wheels on the tracks is causing the gates to re-engage after a train has passed. Third, electrical interference from nearby power lines has caused sporadic issues.

A study by an independent engineering firm is expected to be delivered Wednesday and could provide further detail.

Baird wants Via Rail boss to step down.

Minister says he's lost confidence in Del Bosco as result of crossing-signal issues

John Baird is calling for Via Rail's top man to step down after the Crown corporation erroneously blamed an OC Transpo bus for a signal malfunction earlier this week, an incident that the foreign affairs minister referred to as "the last straw" in the saga of the Barrhaven rail crossings.

"We've lost confidence with the acting head of Via and it is time for new leadership," said Baird, the Conservative MP for Ottawa West-Nepean. "The people of Nepean deserve much better."

Like other local politicians - and the public in general - Baird has been very critical of the repeated rail crossing malfunctions in the south Ottawa community of Barrhaven.

A few weeks ago, together with Nepean-Carleton MP Pierre Poilievre and Transport Canada staff, Baird told senior Via employees he not only wanted the technical issues fixed, but also better communication with the city and the public.

"We were very clear that we would hold them accountable," Baird said. And the person accountable is Steve Del Bosco, Via's interim chief executive.

Baird says government backs him on Via boss.

John Baird says he speaks for the government in calling for railway head to step down, but Transport Minister Lisa Raitt won't go that far. Foreign Affairs

Minister John Baird says he is speaking for the government when he calls for the head of Via Rail to step down.

However Transport Minister Lisa Raitt, who has authority over the arms-length Crown corporation, stopped short of echoing Baird's claim, with a spokesperson saying the minister expects Via to be better.

Baird first told the Citizen on Thursday that it was time for a change in leadership at Via Rail, whose interim president and chief executive Steve Del Bosco was appointed in January.

"We've lost confidence with the acting head of Via and it is time for new leadership," he said. "The people of Nepean deserve much better."

On Friday, Baird again blasted Via, saying its actions over the past two to three weeks have been "unacceptable.

"I've laid out my views very clearly, and I would encourage you to watch in the coming days," Baird told reporters. Asked if that's the government's position or his own, Baird responded, "I always speak for the government."

Via Rail spokesman Jacques C. Gagnon said on Friday that the Crown corporation, as a matter of policy, doesn't make comments about statements by members of Parliament.

It's possible that Baird won't have to wait long to get his wish. Mayor Jim Watson said on Friday that he'd been told that a permanent chief executive was going to be named in two weeks anyway.

"I welcome any change that's going to allow better communications between Via and ourselves," he said.

A spokesperson for Raitt did not confirm that timeline but said Raitt was taking the issue seriously. "Minister Raitt understands Minister Baird's concern, and

our office has discussed the matter with the Chair of the Board. The Minister expects more from VIA going forward," spokesperson Jana Régimbal said.

Baird's remarks came after a back-and-forth between the city and Via Rail about whom to blame for a signal malfunction at the Fallowfield Road railway crossing. Via originally said an OC Transpo bus was to blame but backed away from that claim on Thursday.

Baird said that was "the last straw."

There have been at least a dozen signal malfunctions at Barrhaven railway crossings since last September's bustrain collision that killed six people.

Baird said the challenges for Via have been two-fold: Via has to deal with the technical problems, and it must communicate effectively with the public about the problems.

"The acting head of Via said he would take personal responsibility. Frankly, two or three weeks, Via's actions have been unacceptable," Baird said.

"If you can't operate the technical capacities of a rail crossing, let alone the simple engagement with the public in an honest, transparent, expeditious basis, I don't think you're qualified to run the railways."

Liberal transport critic David McGuinty said it's "very rich" for Baird to blame Via Rail entirely when a 2013 auditor general's report looking at rail safety provided a "scathing indictment" of the government.

Andrew King rediscovers a long-forgotten 19th-century steamship conduit between Ottawa and the Great Lakes that's in the wilderness and which has been slowly consumed by nature.

Trapped in time, forgotten in the woods 70 kilometres north of Ottawa, lies the dream of a steamship route along the Ottawa River.

For centuries, tribes of the First Nations used the Ottawa River as a major trade route, but with the advent of the steamship in the 1800s, a bold new plan was conceived to cut through the undeveloped wilderness of the Ottawa Valley. It would use a system of canals and portage railways to deal with the many waterfalls and rapids on the way to Lake Nipissing and Georgian Bay.

But as locomotives and roads opened the vast wilderness of the Upper Ottawa Valley, these grand plans of utilizing the Ottawa River as a steamship conduit between Ottawa and the Great Lakes would be discarded.

CHATS FALLS

Prior to the construction of the dam and power-generating station at Chats Falls in 1932, the northern end of Lac Deschênes offered a spectacular 40-foot waterfall. This presented a massive problem for the 19th-century shipping business that used the river to transport passengers and freight northward from Ottawa. Without rail service or roads, the river was the only means of moving goods and people from the St. Lawrence Valley to the western reaches of Ontario. The picturesque waterfalls and rapids were significant obstructions to steamship navigation and required ships to dock and unload their passengers and freight and portage around them to another ship waiting upriver.

The Union Forwarding Company decided to build an ambitious horse-drawn railway around the first of these portages in 1846, opening a five-kilometre long railway from its dock at the base of Chats Falls in 1847. Unloading from the newly constructed iron hulled steamship Emerald that departed from Aylmer, passengers boarded horse-drawn railcars. This was the first railway constructed in the Ottawa Valley, and one of the first in Canada. There was only 105 kilometres of railway track in existence in all of Canada in 1847.

This horse-powered train blazed a trail for passengers and freight around Chats Falls on a harrowing journey across swamps and mosquito-infested wilderness in open air cars to another ship waiting for them at Union Village. The Ottawa Citizen in 1869 reported that Prince Arthur travelled the Chats Passage on a trip up the Ottawa River, commenting, "The ride is at once very interesting and rather frightful."

The Union Forwarding Company soon realized a canal would allow their steamships to travel around Chats Falls on a faster and more profitable shipping route from Ottawa to Pembroke. In 1853, a survey was made to cut through the Canadian Shield at Pontiac Village.

With funding from the provincial government, construction on the canal began in 1862 at the base of Chats Falls.

Without the use of pneumatic drills, workers hand-drilled blasting holes into the solid igneous rock, going through 15 to 20 drill bits per inch of drill depth. Progress was slow and costly.

After two years and half a million dollars, the project was abandoned.

With a new steam-powered locomotive railway opening along the same river route, the Chats Falls passage became obsolete, and by 1879 the horse railway and canal were left to disappear into the woods.

THE LOST PASSAGE

After a century and a half, I assumed not much would be left of this once popular portage route through the wilderness north of Ottawa.

Researching mid-19th century maps and current aerial maps of the area, we located the general vicinity of the abandoned canal and railway. Arriving in present-day Pontiac Village, where both passages began, it's clear how much this once-bustling harbour town has changed. A few modern cottages dot the shoreline and the ruins of a 19th century log cabin can be found in the woods.

Hiking into the forest, we soon came across huge piles of blasted rock, obvious remnants of the original 1864 canal construction. Clambering over thousands of tons of blasted rock piles, we arrived at what was the Lost Canal ... a water-filled, mosquito-infested rock cut covered in a century and a half of overgrowth.

It lies preserved in almost the same state as it was left when work came to an abrupt halt 150 years ago. Within the piles of rubble, covered in lichen, the original hand-drilled holes the men worked so hard to make for the blasting dynamite can clearly be seen.

The rock cut they laboured to complete lies trapped in time, an ambitious project left as an unfinished reminder of an era when manpower and sweat did the job of machines we use today.

THE FIRST RAILWAY

With the canal documented, we moved our attention to finding what remained of the first railway in the Ottawa Valley. Abandoned in 1879, this horse-powered railway used wooden rails faced with iron straps or bars. Planking was placed between the rails to provide a firm footing for the horses. These tracks would be long gone, but maybe we could locate the bed the track lay on.

Superimposing an 1850s route map atop a current map, it appeared the railway route may have intersected a remote cottage road. Using swamps as reference points, we hiked into the forest to see if anything remained of this railway once travelled by royalty. Sure enough, it wasn't long before we came across evidence of the original railway: a rock cut with drilled blasting holes. This section of the original five-kilometre railway was about 4½ metres wide and was quite level as it continued into the forest.

Walking the route of the train you could picture how frightening it would have been for passengers to travel in their open-sided horse drawn rail cars through the bug infested woods under a canopy of thick trees, portaging between steamships on their journey up the Ottawa River.

Both the canal and railway lie forgotten in the wilderness, slowly consumed by nature, but both remain a powerful reminder of a time when work was hard, dreams were big and travel was meant to be a memorable adventure.

Saturday 10/05/2014 Ottawa Citizen Smiths Falls Fallowfield Road

Via Rail blames train delays on Transport Canada orders.

Via Rail trains travelling through Barrhaven were expected to be delayed up to an hour Friday night because of orders from Transport Canada, the railway announced. Via Rail, which has come under fire in Ottawa for more than a dozen reported malfunctions recently at Barrhaven crossings, issued a statement at 9:20 p.m. regarding the latest disruption. Spokeswoman Mylène Bélanger said "instructions" from Transport Canada regarding Barrhaven railway crossings mean that there will be delays along the Smiths Falls Subdivision line. Trains are also operating at a slower speed, meaning warning devices at crossings will be going off for longer as well. "VIA Rail apologizes for any inconvenience this situation may cause," Bélanger said. A Transport Canada spokesman couldn't immediately explain what orders had been issued. The latest Via Rail disruption almost immediately got the attention of Mayor Jim Watson online. "I will ask our staff to get yet another explanation from VIA - I share your frustration," he tweeted at a resident asking about delays at Fallowfield Station on Friday evening. Via Rail is due to report to Watson and the rest of council next week an external engineering investigation regarding signals at six Barrhaven railway crossings reportedly going into fail-safe mode at higher frequencies than usual.

Via names new CEO to 5-year term

Baird urges quick action on Barrhaven rail malfunctions

Via Rail has a new chief executive, less than two weeks after Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird called for new leadership at the Crown corporation.

Yves Desjardins-Siciliano has been appointed to a five-year term as Via Rail president and CEO, Transport Minister Lisa Raitt announced on Sunday.

The announcement came less than 48 hours after Raitt issued a six-month emergency directive to address the "immediate threat" to rail safety caused by repeated malfunctions at six Via Rail crossings in Barrhaven.

The order, which lays out expected operating practices for Via to follow, will be in effect until Nov. 9 or until Via determines the problem and how to fix it.

"The health and safety of Canadians is our top priority. I've expressed my displeasure with the situation to Via," said Raitt in an email.

The ongoing signal problems in Barrhaven will be one of the major issues confronting Desjardins-Siciliano as he assumes the top job.

An experienced lawyer, Desjardins-Siciliano had been Via's chief corporate and legal officer and corporate secretary since 2010. In that job, he was responsible for managing major capital projects and public affairs, as well as legal matters, risk management and the governance of Via's board of directors.

The new chief executive said in a statement it is an "honour and a privilege" to be chosen for the job. "The task ahead is to ensure that intercity passenger rail continues to play a key role in the economic prosperity of Canada," Desjardins-Siciliano said in the released comments.

Desjardins-Siciliano replaces Steve Del Bosco, a longtime Via employee who had been interim president and CEO since January.

The appointment comes after Baird, the member of Parliament for Ottawa West-Nepean and a former transportation minister, called for new leadership at Via Rail due to its handling of the signal malfunctions at Barrhaven rail crossings.

On Sunday, a spokesman for Baird said the minister welcomed the change of leadership at the Crown corporation, and called on Desjardins-Siciliano to quickly address the Barrhaven issues.

"The new CEO's first order of business must be to fix the technical issues that have plagued Barrhaven crossings, which have frustrated local residents for months," spokesman Adam Hodge said in a statement.

"Open communication with those residents and city officials on VIA's actions is equally paramount," he said.

"Via must rebuild its trust among the community, whose faith has been shaken by its lack of progress on these issues." When Baird made his initial comments, others pointed out that a permanent chief executive had been set to be named soon anyway. Liberal transport critic David McGuinty accused Baird of trying to score political points and deflect blame.

Del Bosco, as planned, will now resume his previous job as Via's chief commercial planning officer, according to a Via statement.

"On behalf of the board of directors, I wish to thank Mr. Del Bosco for his commitment to the corporation and, in particular, for answering the call with professionalism and dedication over the last five months," said Paul G. Smith, chair of Via Rail's board of directors.

There have been at least a dozen malfunctions since the tragic bus crash last September between an OC Transpo and a Via Rail train at one of the Barrhaven crossings that killed six people.

Although the train signals worked properly that day, the accident has left some residents of the south end community anxious, a sentiment heightened by the rail crossing glitches.

Under the Railway Safety Act, the transport minister can issue an emergency directive if she is concerned about an immediate threat to the safety and security of rail operations. The directive can be for six months or until the problems are fixed. It can be extended for another six months if necessary.

Transport Canada had already issued on April 10 safety warnings for the six crossings then lifted them two weeks later for four of the crossings - Fallowfield, Jockvale, Greenbank and Strandherd roads - when the problems were resolved and it was decided flagmen were no longer needed in person at the crossings. The orders remained for the other two crossings - Transitway and Woodroffe - and now all six will be under the emergency directive.

Jana Regimbal, a spokeswoman for Raitt, said the minister decided to step in with the emergency directive now because the false activation of the warnings systems at the six crossings continues and the cause remains unknown.

Via said Transport Canada's order for the Barrhaven railway means there will be delays of about 10 minutes along the line that runs out to Smith Falls.

Trains are also operating at a slower speed, meaning warning devices at crossings will be going off for longer.

Via Rail is expected to report to Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson and the rest of council this week with the results of an external engineering investigation into signals at the Barrhaven crossings. The Directive's Conditions: At Woodroffe and Transitway crossings, Via must ensure:

A flag person is on site before the arrival of all freight and passenger trains;

Trains do not cross the intersection until two flag persons - one on each side of the train - are in place to provide manual protection for pedestrians and motorists;

Flag persons remain in place until the train has completely cleared the crossing.

At Fallowfield, Greenbank, Jockvale roads and Strandherd Drive, Via Rail must ensure trains only cross the intersection after the warning system has been activated and the gate arms have been horizontal for at least five seconds before a train arrives.

At all six crossings, Via Rail must ensure that the warning system deactivates correctly and the state of the warning system is reported to the Rail Traffic Controller.

How Via Rail says it's fixing the signal problems in Barrhaven
Electrical equipment's been replaced, wind brackets on gates changed, computerized systems updated, and cameras will be installed by the train company, writes
MICHAEL WOODS

What is the problem?

Over the past few months, signals at railway crossings in Barrhaven have gone into fail-safe mode - lights flash, bells ring and gates lower, even though there's no train present - more often than normal. There have been at least a dozen occurrences in the past few months. Via officials stress there was never any safety risk for the public, just "huge inconvenience." Via commissioned independent reports from three consulting firms looking into the root causes of the glitches. Those reports were submitted a couple of weeks ago and Via presented council with a plan on Thursday.

Why is this happening in Barrhaven?

There's an unusually high concentration of crossings within a short distance in Barrhaven (six within less than six kilometres), and traffic volume at certain intersections has increased by 40 per cent in the past three years. More than 20,000 cars and as many as 21 trains a day cross at Woodroffe and Fallowfield, according to Dennis Pinsonneault, Via's chief customer experience and operating officer. The proximity of Fallowfield station and the Fallowfield Road signals being connected with city traffic lights also complicate matters.

What is causing the signals to go into fail-safe mode when they shouldn't?

There's no single cause of the problem. Via contractor Railterm's vice-president Aaron Branston said the independent reports found causes falling into four categories: electrical (contaminants in the track including water and salt, interference from outside hydro power), operational (interconnected crossing signal circuits), mechanical (gate motor problems and misalignments, damaged and broken gates), and software (circuit board failure). Via has said the confluence of many of these factors hadn't happened before this winter.

What changes have been made already?

Branston said about two-thirds of the measures to mitigate future glitches have already been completed. For example: at the Woodroffe and Transitway crossings, electrical equipment has been replaced, wind brackets on gates have been changed, and computerized systems have been replaced. At Jockvale and Strandherd, signal frequencies and train speeds have been changed; since then, there have been no glitches. Via has asked Railterm to increase the frequency of inspections, and conducted a detailed investigation into every occurrence of fail-safe mode.

What changes are coming?

Most of the remaining work will be done by the end of June. Cameras will be installed at Woodroffe, Fallowfield and Transitway crossings by then, and at the remaining three crossings by end of summer. Railterm will conduct several preventive maintenance tests, normally conducted over an eight-year period, within the next 30 days. Via, along with Transport Canada, will conduct a mandated "detailed safety assessment" a year early. There will also be personnel posted nearby at peak hours (6 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday to Friday) for faster maintenance responses. Longer-term, Via plans to build a siding track between Ottawa and Fallowfield stations to reduce congestion.

When will this be finished?

Former Via Rail chief operating officer John Marginson has been brought in to supervise the work. Chief executive Yves Desjardins-Siciliano said efforts are proceeding at full speed so the work will be completed by the time Transport Canada's six-month emergency directive to Via finishes in November, if not sooner. Under that directive, trains must travel at reduced speeds and flag persons must be stationed at the six Barrhaven crossings. Constructing the siding track could take until next summer, depending on next winter's weather.

Friday 16/05/2014 Ottawa Citizen Smiths Falls Fallowfield Road

New Via CEO vows to fix rail crossings and restore public trust

Via Rail's new chief executive vowed on Thursday to restore the public's trust in Barrhaven rail crossings as officials unveiled a long-awaited plan to fix the signal problems that have raised the ire of politicians and the public.

In his fourth day on the job, Yves Desjardins-Siciliano told a crowd that included Mayor Jim Watson, councillors, city staff and assembled media at city hall that he's committed to improving communication between Via Rail and the city and public.

"At the end of the day, Via Rail is a public service, and we're here to serve the public," he said. "I have absolute confidence that Mayor Watson and local representatives will take advantage of our openness and come to me with any issues."

Desjardins-Siciliano was appointed on Sunday to replace interim chief executive Steve Del Bosco, whose leadership was criticized by Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird after continued signal problems at Barrhaven crossings. The new CEO said that level of scrutiny is "totally appropriate" and comes with the job.

"I think public officials do their job when they call other public officials to account for their management of affairs. I accept that pressure," he said, adding that he has already felt the "warm intensity" of local politicians Watson, Baird and Pierre Poilievre, and of his boss, Transport Minister Lisa Raitt.

"I can feel the heat of their breath on my neck."

Desjardins-Siciliano and senior rail staff outlined a plan to fix the problem of signals going into "fail-safe mode" - when signals are activated even though there's no train or one has already passed - more often than usual.

The plan follows three reports that independent consulting firms did for Via regarding the problem. VIA Rail contractor Railterm's vice-president Aaron Branston said about two-thirds of the plan has already been done, with most of the remaining work to be completed by July.

The remaining measures include installing cameras at the Fallowfield, Transitway and Woodroffe crossings, increasing the frequency of regular inspections and installing an electronic defect tracking system to detect trends.

In the longer term, Via will build a new siding track between Ottawa and Fallowfield stations to reduce false activations due to train traffic congestion.

To supervise the fixes, Desjardins-Siciliano said, he's bringing former Via Rail chief operating officer John Marginson out of retirement. "He and I will be talking every day," he said.

Desjardins-Siciliano stressed that although it was a "huge inconvenience" to have gates down when no train was approaching, or when one had already left, "at no moment was public safety at risk."

However, Watson said that until the public's confidence in the crossings returns, there is still a problem to deal with.

"While the president of Via might be technically correct, the fact of the matter is there is this uncertainty when people are crossing those crossings in the Barrhaven area."

Desjardins-Siciliano acknowledged that Via could have done a better job explaining the situation to people.

"For that miscommunication, I apologize. But I'd rather fail on a communication matter than fail on an operating matter."

Watson said he was "cautiously optimistic" after Thursday's presentation, but was quick to add that "actions are going to speak louder than words."

Barrhaven Coun. Jan Harder, who has been a fierce critic of Via Rail in recent months, said she heard a lot more answers on Thursday than in Via's briefing last month, which left her with mostly questions.

Petition to turn old Outaouais train track into bike trail

Train hasn't run since part of the track was washed out in a 2011 landslide

A Chelsea woman has collected hundreds of signatures to petition the municipal owners of the railroad tracks from Gatineau to Wakefield to transform the corridor into a bike and recreation trail.

The steam train hasn't run since a part of the track was washed out in a 2011 landslide.

Movements to restore track have been stalled, as the project's estimated price tag ballooned from \$5 million to \$50 million. There were also concerns that the soil conditions around the track will invite another landslide.

Tammy Scott said she's been hearing the idea of converting the track to a trail since she moved to Chelsea four years ago. As a neighbour to the track and an avid cyclist, she supported the idea, too.

"I thought, 'Hmm. Maybe we need to start by showing that this is something that the community wants, and have kind of a bottom up petition,'" she said.

"The really fascinating thing is how quickly the petition has grown."

In a week, she has collected more than 800 signatures on the online petition.

"I think it's a great way to connect the community," she said.

Scott suggested the cost of converting the trail could be covered from the sale of the steel from the tracks.

Tracks already used as trail in winter

Alain Piché has helped groom the track for use during the winter for the last eight years. He's part of Sentiers Chelsea Trails, a group dedicated to maintaining and building trails to promote active living and the enjoyment of nature.

"The response, particularly in the last few years, has just been amazing in terms of the support of the community," he said.

The enormous cost of fixing the track is just one reason it should be lifted to make way for recreation, Piché said.

"We as a community have to look at the asset the corridor represents and figure out how to use it. Put it to its best use for residents. In my view, that's using it as a trail," Piché said.

The Outaouais Tourism Board has previously indicated that the steam train brings up to 60,000 tourists into Wakefield each year, generating nearly \$10 million in revenues.

Piché and Scott said a new trail could bring in tourists in, too, who might stop at local businesses along the way.

"As I like to jokingly say, 'If we build it, they will come,'" Scott said. "Increasingly we want to stand for healthy living and we want to stand for green tourism, eco-tourism, so I think this just adds to the already rich options of people to come to Canada to visit."

Push for trail picks up steam

Chelsea residents balk at \$50M cost to repair the tracks for locomotive

Three years after landslides idled the scenic steam train between Gatineau and Wakefield, momentum is building to tear out its washout-prone tracks and replace them with a multi-purpose trail.

The push got a boost recently when it was revealed that the cost of repairing the tracks, which were damaged from a landslide in June 2011, could top \$50 million. That would require three levels of government to pitch in, something Chelsea Mayor Caryl Green says is unpalatable for her community, which is home to 80 per cent of the tracks but gets no real economic benefit from them.

Chelsea council have informally indicated it doesn't support paying to repair the tracks, Green said, although there has been no formal vote on the issue.

"Times have changed. Twentyfive years ago when the mayor at the time opted for the train, it was a different world. Chelsea is known for its active lifestyle. We have doubled our population. Now the pressure will be on council to support a trail system."

Chelsea owns the section of tracks that runs through it, although the company that operates the steam train has a 25-year lease on those tracks. If other municipalities, along with other levels of government, chipped in to repair them, the steam train could run again. But many think the rising cost of repairs might soon sound a death knell for the train.

The train has had an off-again, on-again history. Most recently, the train has sat idle since damage to the tracks three years ago while attempts to raise enough money to repair the tracks have failed. Supporters note that the tracks have been in place for more than a century and the steam train has brought tens of thousands of tourists to the area annually and generated significant revenue over the past 15 years.

Now, news that the repairs would cost much more than originally estimated \$50 million or more have many thinking about alternatives for the tracks that run along the Gatineau River much of the way between Gatineau and Wakefield. Chelsea Mayor Green said the community would like to see the tracks used as a trail if the train doesn't run again.

Chelsea's Tammy Scott, who lives near the tracks, started a petition to have the tracks turned into a trail. Within a week, she had 800 signatures, many from Chelsea, but others from further afield.

"I have been talking to people and am feeling there is a groundswell of people interested in a pathway."

Turning the tracks into a trail would connect neighbourhoods in Chelsea and allow children to get to recreation programs and camps without riding on busy or dangerous roads. The tracks have been used by the community in the winter for the past eight years, something Scott and others say has been embraced by the community.

Alain Piché, a co-founder of the group Sentiers Chelsea Trails, said such a trail would be an "amazing link" for people who live in the area and also a potential new focus for tourism.

"It could be a wonderful community trail. That is how we see its development in the event that (the steam train) isn't relaunched and refinanced. And it looks more and more likely that is going to be the case."

Scott said many Chelsea residents are excited about the prospect of having a north-south corridor that would get them off busy roads. And people feel strongly that the cost of repairing the train tracks is simply out of reach.

"If you ask anyone, the large majority would tell you \$50 million to bring back the steam train would be so much better invested in health care, not that we don't love the train, but this is a much more viable option."

Piché said work has yet to be done on a detailed proposal for a trail, and it depends on what eventually becomes of the train, but Scott said some other groups have found that the cost of tearing out train tracks to build a stonedust trail can be largely covered through the sale of the steel rails.

Fishy facts on tracks

By Anastasia Philopoulos

With talk of what to do next with the train tracks, it seems that we may have kissed the Wakefield steam train goodbye. But amid new debates heating up in the region, it appears discussions might not be quite finished. New facts continue to surface on the state of soil stabilization and its purported \$50 million dollar price tag.

"If there was a study presented, it didn't have that number in it," said Louise Boudrias, President of the Corporation du chemin de fer de l'Outaouais (CCFO). It's been almost a month since the Low Down published a story stating it would cost approximately \$50 million to fix the soil along the train tracks from Gatineau to Chelsea. The information first appeared in Le Droit, which reported that a study done by the Ministère des Transports et du Québec (MTQ) was presented to CCFO officials and Outaouais mayors. The study allegedly included the \$50 million estimate. After a bit of head scratching on the part of several officials "where is this study to be found?" the Low Down did some light digging.

According to Boudrias, the meeting in Quebec City in late March included an estimate of what the cost might be, but it is almost June and still none of the stakeholders has seen the much-discussed study that would likely kill the popular tourist train.

Via Rail CEO hires John Marginson as railway's new fixer.

Former chief operating officer tackles signal problems at crossings, writes Michael Woods.

When Yves Desjardins-Siciliano became Via Rail's chief executive this month, one of the first things he did was call John Marginson.

Marginson, 62, retired as Via's chief operating officer two years ago after 40 years in the rail industry. But fixing the recurring signal problems at railway crossings in Barrhaven, which shook public confidence and infuriated local politicians, was near the top of the new CEO's to-do list. He tapped Marginson as the man to oversee the fixes. Less than 48 hours later, Marginson left his home in Aurora, Ont., and has since been in Barrhaven as senior adviser to the president and CEO. He sat down with the Citizen at Fallowfield Station Thursday to talk about how he's working to fix the signals, restore public confidence in the crossings and improve communication with the city. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q How closely were you following the Barrhaven situation while you were retired, and what did you make of it at the time?

A I occasionally would do a Via search on Google News, so I was somewhat familiar. I found it troubling because I know what a great company Via is, I know how safety-conscious the company is. So it was a little troubling for me to read what I was reading and not be able to do anything.

Q A So How far has it's gone it gone well. so The far? two objectives that I wanted to achieve are well on their way to achievement. The first objective is to fix the problem and re-establish the confidence of the users of the crossings. And the second objective is to reinforce the communications aspect.

Q The problems in Barrhaven are complex; Via contractor RailTerm mentioned four categories of issues. But if you could distil it, how would you describe what the problem is and how do you go about fixing it?

A It is difficult to distil it down into a couple of problems. Via called in expert companies and asked them to turn over every stone, and they came up with 131 issues. We're tackling all of them. We have almost 90 actions completed and by early July we'll have 125. We're already seeing improvements. I was looking at some of the performance statistics for Jockvale and Strandherd, and they're performing very well. Greenbank has had a couple of problems; we think we know what they are and we're preparing the fix for those. The other two, Fallowfield and Woodroffe, those are the ones that are a little more complex. If I was to point at one category, it's the electrical category. Mechanically, the systems seem to be working well. The software issues are very minor. Operational errors can occur, but they also are extremely rare. So really the category we've spent most of our time on, and the one that we have the most to do yet, is on the electrical side.

Q There are reports of a problem Wednesday night at Woodroffe crossing. What happened?

A Very interestingly enough, I was on that locomotive. One of the locomotive engineers had mentioned some of his observations, so I wanted to meet him personally. I got into the cab of the locomotive, we had a very quick chat and then he started to proceed toward Woodroffe eastbound. Essentially, there is a feature in the cab of the locomotive that he will key in a remote activation of the crossing. He then has 60 seconds to get to the actual main track. Last night, he didn't get to the main track in 60 seconds. When that happens, the gates believe it was a false activation and the gates will start to come up. That's exactly what happened last night: the gates started to come up. Just as they were coming up, seven seconds later he got onto the main track. Now, the main track detects that the train is there, so the gates go back down again. The system performed exactly as it's supposed to perform ... the locomotive didn't move quite quickly enough. Q Why was that? A When you're crossing Woodroffe, you have to also contact the flag people who are at that crossing, so it takes a little extra time to contact the foreman of those flag people and request clearance to proceed. That, probably along with me being in the cab and introducing myself, we went past the 60 seconds.

Q How do you restore public confidence in the crossings?

A The simple way is make the system work. You could have many, many, many days of problem-free operations, and you have one day where there's a little glitch and your many days of rebuilding the public confidence is destroyed.

22/06/2014 Canoe.ca Kingston (CN)

VIA Train Hits Pedestrian Disrupts Passenger Service

Kingston Ontario - An Ottawa-bound train VIA Rail passenger train struck a pedestrian 20 minutes after leaving the Kingston station shortly after noon Sunday, crippling service along Toronto-Ottawa-Montreal route.

"The incident happened 20 minutes after the train left the Kingston station," VIA spokesman Mylene Belanger said.

"It was eastbound so this was a train that left Toronto at 9:25 a.m. (Sunday) and it had just left the Kingston station at 11:56 a.m. when the incident happened and the pedestrian was hit."

All VIA trains are stopped while Kingston Police investigate.

"Right now the train (involved) is stopped and traffic in both directions between Toronto-Ottawa and Toronto-Montreal is stopped," Belanger said.

"The passengers on the train involved in the accident are still on board as this train is not at a safe location."

There are 206 Ottawa-bound and 189 Montreal-bound passengers still on the train involved.

Both the Kingston Police and VIA Rail would not comment on the condition of the pedestrian or the state of the investigation, however, several news outlets reported the person was killed.

"We are very sad at the situation," said Belanger.

"Our thoughts go out to the victim and his or her family as well as to the "locomotion engineer" (Quotation marks added by editor)."

Belanger did confirm that there was only one pedestrian involved in the incident.

VIA Rail is providing updates through their twitter account and Facebook page as well as on their web site

Friday 04/07/2014 Ottawa Citizen Smiths Falls Fallowfield Road

Rail staff in Barrhaven called police about track

Barrhaven residents weren't the only ones concerned about safety around railway tracks earlier this year. Via Rail workers were also worried and asked police for help.

Railway signal malfunctions were being reported frequently in April when Via Rail asked Ottawa police if officers could help make workers feel safer, according to Ottawa police documents released under freedom of information legislation. Via workers were posted to crossings, in part to make sure cars stopped when necessary.

"Our workers at the various crossings feel unsafe when the crossing signals are functioning and they are positioned on the roadway ensuring vehicles are stopped by holding hand held stop signs," Via Rail police Insp. Fernand Breau wrote in an email to Ottawa police Acting Insp. Mark Patterson.

"Quite often vehicles accelerate rendering the safety in peril as soon crossing gate is lifted even when red flashing lights are operating."

Ottawa police were investigating whether tampering was a factor in the malfunctions at the time, but West Division officers also had experience being called about reported glitches. By April, police had responded to at least 35 malfunction calls, an internal memo shows.

Later, Patterson wrote an email within Ottawa police saying Via didn't consider paying for paid duty officers to be an option. The question was raised when a vehicle went through a crossing too fast, caused an issue with the sensor and the crossing arm hitting a vehicle, Patterson wrote.

Ultimately, said Ottawa police director of communications John Steinbachs by email on Thursday, paid duty resources were provided at rail crossings only on March 14, June 14 and June 15. The cost to Via was \$3,900, Steinbachs said, adding police gave an estimate for additional shifts but "a decision was made not to use dedicated resources."

"Given the malfunctions, direction was given to patrol officers to increase their awareness of the Via Rail crossings as part of regular patrols. No costs associated with that work have been billed to Via Rail," Steinbachs said.

To address staff safety concerns, Via spokesman Jacques C. Gagnon said increased police patrols were requested but they're no longer required. Gagnon said Via didn't pay Ottawa police or the city for that.

Locomotive may lurk underground

Construction crews on Albert Street have unearthed a mysterious opening that may be the entrance to a long-rumoured "beer tunnel" that has beguiled Ottawa's historians for years.

Now those same historians are worried that the current sewer work could destroy an important part of the city's heritage.

It's "a piece of Ottawa history that's being torn apart," said Andrew King, an Ottawa artist and amateur historian who has researched the tunnels.

Photos taken by the City of Ottawa were posted Wednesday on Ottawa's West Side Action, a blog on urban development issues by activist Eric Darwin. The photos show a concrete tunnel full of water with an entrance sloping down into the ground.

It could be one of two tunnels rumoured to exist near LeBreton Flats, the site of Ottawa's main trainyard until the mid-60s. In the 1940s a major brewing operation, Brading's Capital Brewery Ltd., straddled what is now Albert Street. The brewery underwent a major expansion in 1945. It included a warehouse on the north side and a manufacturing plant on the south side.

Part of the expansion plan included a tunnel under the street connecting the warehouse to the plant near today's intersection of Preston and Albert streets.

In 1947, construction for the tunnel was mentioned in testimony about a traffic accident near the site, and a 1949 engineering diagram showed a "Brading's Brewery Tunnel" clearly marked.

The cross-section diagram shows the tunnel, about 20 metres long, ran across the street and sloped downward in an elbow shape underneath water mains and a sewer line. The tunnel was also marked on several fire insurance maps that King found in public library records.

This appears to fit the description of what city workers reportedly found Wednesday.

The Ottawa beer plant was demolished after the brewing business was consolidated in Toronto in 1969. The warehouse across the street was demolished in 1983.

Now, the current construction work might seal the tunnel for good.

"There are no plans to preserve the tunnel within the Albert Street Right-of-Way," said Richard Holder, manager of light rail projects for the City of Ottawa.

"Portions of the tunnel that remain between the new sewer and water main pipes will be filled with earth and low strength concrete to enforce road stability."

King worries other city projects, including upcoming LRT construction at LeBreton Flats, could damage what may be a larger system of tunnels, including a rumoured east-west rail tunnel that may contain an abandoned railway engine.

Around 1988 a city employee, who spoke anonymously to the Citizen in 2012, found a tunnel running just north of and parallel to Albert Street, about 80 metres east of the former brewery and 120 metres east of the Brading's tunnel.

During construction work to repair a broken water main just east of Preston and Albert streets, the man rappelled into a sink hole and found what he described as a rail tunnel, two metres high.

He said he found old beer bottles and cases on the floor and a small train similar to a mine train, about four or five metres long, on a narrow track.

The existence of this second tunnel and of the train is questioned, but based on his research King strongly believes it is hiding beneath LeBreton Flats on National Capital Commission land. It is unaffected by current construction on Albert Street.

King is working with an NCC archaeologist and an assistant curator at the Canada Museum of Science and Technology to draft an agreement to work on investigating and possibly preserving any tunnels ahead of redevelopment plans for the site.

Sean Tudor, from the museum, says the museum and the NCC have been working together for about six months to find the best way to conduct a non-invasive study of the east-west rail tunnel.

Tudor says based on the historical research he and King have conducted there is enough circumstantial evidence to believe the tunnel exists, and that it was likely a shunt line connecting the CP lines at the train yard to the Marine Signal building owned by Thomas "Carbide" Willson. The building, once the longest in the British Empire, was later bought by the brewery company.

"It would make sense," said Tudor, adding if the tunnel exists it is more likely to have been used in the early 20th century and not by the brewery. "If there is a locomotive there, it probably dates back to the late teens or early '20s," he said.

King, for one, is hoping Wednesday's discovery is just the beginning, not the end, of the story.

"Part of the fun of this mystery is finding out what's down there," he said. "Let's see if it's there. If it is there, let's preserve it as a piece of Ottawa's industrial history. This is all that's left. It's a reminder of what LeBreton Flats used to be."

10/07/2014 OK the PK Kingston (CN) Brockville

CN Rail Accident Disrupts Canadian Passenger Train Service

Brockville Ontario - A Canadian National Railway freight train derailed within the city limits of Brockville, in eastern Ontario, on Thursday, disrupting passenger train service in the Toronto-Ottawa-Montreal corridor.

Canada's Transportation Safety Board said 26 cars were involved in the derailment and has sent a team of investigators to the site, about 115 kilometers (72 miles) south of Ottawa, the nation's capital.

Passenger train service provider VIA Rail alerted travelers on its web site and on Twitter that "alternate transportation" would be provided.

A CN Rail spokeswoman said the derailment occurred around 4:10 a.m., and that derailed cars included two loaded auto carriers, 13 unloaded fuel tank cars, and five cars carrying carbon powder.

Spokeswoman Lindsay Fedchyshyn said an initial assessment showed no leaks, and that the mainline between Toronto and Montreal would be reopened as soon as it is safe to do so.

City will retire fatal bus route number

Crash victims to get a monument

The city will retire OC Transpo Route 76 in recognition of those who died in last fall's fatal bus-train collision near Barrhaven.

Mayor Jim Watson said he has been consulting with the families involved for the past two months to determine how best to remember their loved ones.

"The number 76 obviously had very sad connotations," he said in an interview, adding that he's heard from passengers and bus drivers asking for the number to be changed.

"There was a consensus amongst all the families that they would like to see that number retired, and we're respecting their wishes."

The route, which travels between Barrhaven and downtown, will be renamed Route 72 when OC Transpo's fall schedule comes into effect in September.

Watson said the families also agreed on the creation of a commemorative plaque or marker at a to-be-determined location.

The Sept. 18 bus-train crash at a level crossing near the Fallowfield Transitway station crash sheared the front off the Route 76 doubledecker bus and killed the driver, David Woodard, and passengers Connor Boyd, Kyle Nash, Karen Krzyzewski, Rob More and Michael Bleakney.

"I see that bus all the time, and it is a constant reminder ... it gives me a sickening feeling in my stomach," said Barrhaven Coun. Jan Harder. "So for those who were on the bus or who lost family members and friends, it has to be difficult for them."

Flags at city buildings will fly half-mast on the one-year anniversary of the collision. There will also be a minute of silence at the previous day's transit commission meeting.

Harder and transit commission chair Coun. Diane Deans will work with the families in the coming months to determine what the monument should be, and the best place for it.

Watson and Harder said it won't be at the site of the crash, which is a busy level crossing.

"That would not be appropriate, and it would be dangerous," Harder said. She said there have been discussions about where to put the commemoration. She didn't get into details, but said it should be in a place where visitors can have some privacy.

Watson said the general desire is to have it in the Barrhaven area.

The mayor said there were other ideas raised, particularly whether the families wanted the city to organize any sort of memorial service at one of the churches nearby. However, there wasn't consensus on that, he said.

"My sense is that the families some may have their churches host a memorial service and others will grieve privately, and we fully respect that," he said.

Four lawsuits have been filed against the city and Woodard's estate since the crash. More and Bleakney's families have filed lawsuits, as have two surviving passengers.

The cause of the crash has not yet been determined.

Wednesday 23/07/2014 Low Down to Hull and Bac Maniwaki

Wakefield Quebec - With the Wakefield steam train in park mode since 2011, a situation that may be permanent, shop owners, restaurant owners, and many residents miss the old choo choo.

But what about those who rode the train during its final days?

The ones who made it run, such as steam train fireman Philip Jago?

He worked on both of the latest incarnations of the old Hull-Chelsea-Wakefield line and misses it dearly.

"I loved it. I absolutely loved it", said Jago.

"It was the best job in the world".

Jago has fond memories of speaking with passengers at the Wakefield station while the train switched directions.

"We would pull in and one of the highlights of the arrival in Wakefield was turning the locomotive around on the turntable", he said.

Tourists and the train's workers would chitchat about the train's history, passengers' memories, and their parents' memories, too.

He remembers a passenger saying that they took the train immediately following their wedding, and another who said they rode it for their first trip to the city.

For some, engine number 909 might not be so familiar.

The train that ran in 2011 wasn't the same as the one that rode the tracks in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Back then, the National Capital Commission and the Museum of Science and Technology ran a train twice a week.

It was built in 1944 with Canadian equipment and was known as Canadian Pacific Engine 1201.

Jago volunteered on that train as a young man, working the fire to create the steam alongside the engineer.

After the train pulled away for the last time, when the government realized it wasn't suited to the train business, Jago got his job back in 2006, but this time on a Swedish-made model built in 1907.

The engineer and fireman switch position.

"The principles are the same, the North American equipment is set up for what they call right hand running", explained Jago.

Engine 909 also ran more frequently, transporting tens of thousands of passengers from May to October every year.

For Jago, one of the perks working on the 909 was seeing the incredibly quick shift the train made on Friday and Saturday nights from a passenger train to a dining train.

The cars were swept, linen was rolled onto tables, silverware was carefully placed, and, in no time at all, the train was ready for customers who were dressed to the nines.

"this was a serious endeavor", said Jago.

"It was beautiful. People would be dressed in their finery".

It should be no surprise by now to realize that Jago is devastated that "the jewel of the Outaouais" is barely on life support.

He said he doesn't believe the \$50 million estimate for fixing the track is accurate and say the only tracks that need to be fixed are along the "Mile Hill".

"I would hope that enough people have enough foresight to see the tremendous value the train brings to the area", said Jago.

"I hope that the right decision is made and repairs are done".

At this point repairs are still possible, Pontiac MNA Stephanie Vallee told Le Droit this week that the \$50 million estimate it had quoted in a story was not based on fact.

There is still hope, for Jago and for many in the region who think the little engine that could, still can.

Joel Balsam.

Via alerted to 223 signal faults near Fallowfield in five years

One of the more piercing questions since the fatal OC Transpo crash with a train almost a year ago has not been the competency of bus service, but the performance of Via Rail.

While there's no indication any blame lies with the railway, the attack-line to an anxious public has been this:

How well does Via run a railroad, when it can't run a crossing signal?

Using the access-to-information law, the Citizen has obtained 65 pages of documents that finally put the story of the wonky road-rail signals in Barrhaven through a longer lens.

The numbers confirm Via has known for years that a number of the six signals in the immediate area around Fallowfield station have needed repeated attention, sometimes several times a month. A tabulation from 2009 to 2013 shows Via responded to at least 223 incidents involving defective operations at six well-travelled intersections: Woodroffe, the OC Transitway, Fallowfield, Greenbank, Jockvale and Strandherd.

The crossing at Strandherd Drive needed the most attention, at 63 responses, while Fallowfield Road was second, at 43. As Via claimed privacy and third-party exemptions on almost every page - in effect, blacking out information- it is possible the actual five-year number is higher.

"It does seem unusually high," said David Jeanes, the former president of Transport Action Canada, which monitors the country's rail industry.

"With that number of malfunctions, whether safety is preserved or not, it is a major inconvenience to the motorists. Those crossings are all on heavily travelled roads."

The numbers, in a way, are hardly shocking. Barrhaven commuters know all too well the situation has been unpredictable and long-standing.

In April, area MP and senior cabinet minister John Baird was furious after a spate of reports about the sporadic malfunctioning of signals not far from the site where six people were killed in September 2013.

He demanded action within a week, even if it meant camping out in the railway corridor 24/7.

The Citizen reported then there had been at least 10 or 11 reports since the crash, a day when the signals were operating correctly.

In fact, the number was certainly higher: The documents indicate 14 reports of defects in the three months ending Dec. 31.

Pressed by Transport Minister Lisa Raitt, Via has responded with a set of extraordinary measures, reportedly the only cluster of intersections in Canada to get this kind of attention.

Via personnel or contractors are actually standing by the intersections to ensure the lights and barriers are working when a train approaches.

"Think about how much they've spent on troubleshooting those signals," remarked Jeanes.

The "bird's eye view" of the cause of the problem comes back to Via's standard answer: The signals are fairly complex devices designed to go into "failsafe" mode whenever a monitor detects a problem.

"Fail-safe" is a term meaning the lights and barriers will be activated even if a train is not present or on the way. And, indeed, according to the maintenance reports, this accounts for at least 75 per cent of the 200plus reports.

The records released to the Citizen provide only the briefest summary of the nature of the 223 calls. Among the reasons crews were called out: lights operating, gate not clearing; lights flashing continuously; shopping cart left on tracks, activating signals; gate broken; one gate reported as not descending.

While cold weather seemed to complicate things, often there appeared to be little rhyme or reason why the signals would malfunction with mysterious frequency, sometimes five and six times a month. There were 62 incidents catalogued in 2011, 61 in 2012, but only 36 in 2013.

The intersection of the tracks with the Transitway, which runs parallel to Woodroffe, had the least number of calls during the five-year stretch, at seven, but three during 2013.

After a barrage of complaints and a communications mess, Via turned the page in May with a new CEO, a new point man for Ottawa, a public apology, a detailed explanation for the repeated failures and a fix-it plan.

(Causes were broken down into electrical, mechanical, software or operational issues, ranging from salt and water damage to lightning impacts to defective rails, gate motor problems and faulty circuit boards.)

Via spokesman Jacques Gagnon said this week about 99 per cent of the to-do list is complete. "It's a fairly unique location in Canada where you have so many crossings in such a close area," he said this week.

"A minor glitch at one can cause the (other) crossings to go down at a moment's notice."

An update is planned Aug. 18 in a meeting with Mayor Jim Watson and Coun. Jan Harder.

Harder said she's not surprised by the figure 223 for the number of signal malfunctions in the past five years. "There was a time when we were having issues on a daily basis."

But she stresses that the level of trust between Via and the community has been rebuilt since May. "The difference has been night and day. I'm pleased with the level of communication, which is giving me confidence about the level of attention."

There are plans to separate Greenbank and Strandherd from rail with underpasses, she said.

Investigators have already reported the train, Via Train 51, left Ottawa Station at 8:32 that morning. The crossing signals were activated 47 seconds before the impact with OC's route 76. The train was travelling 47 m.p.h. at the time and train emergency brakes were activated two seconds before the crash.

01/08/2014 msn.com

Kingston (CN)

Gananoque

Derailed CN Freight Car Hits VIA Rail Train Near Gananoque

Gananoque Ontario - A derailed CN freight car crashed into a passenger VIA Rail train near Gananoque on Friday afternoon, stopping train service between Toronto and Montreal just ahead of the long weekend. Service is also cancelled between Ottawa and Toronto.

VIA Rail said that of 300 passengers, one reported a minor injury. The train had left Ottawa at 12:30. Around 14:15, six cars of an eastbound CN freight train left the track, according to CN director of public affairs Jim Feeny. While it's still early in the investigation, Feeny said it appears one of the empty cars hit and punctured the VIA train's fuel tank.

One of the freight cars that derailed contained lube oil but none escaped, Feeny said. The other five cars were empty, he said.

The two CN employees on the train were not injured, he said.

The VIA passenger train's cars are still upright but the train has been immobilized by the crash.

The Transportation Safety Board of Canada is investigating.

4,100 Passengers Affected by Crash

VIA Rail spokesperson Mylene Belanger said 16 trains were cancelled after the crash, affecting 4,100 passengers. Train service is expected to resume Saturday. Ticket holders were offered the option of taking the bus instead of the train. But as of 20:00, Belanger said the company was still trying to find enough buses and drivers to accommodate all travellers.

"We've been working very hard to secure buses for affected passengers, and as of now we still have not been able to secure alternate transportation for all our customers. Accordingly, no service will be provided for a few trains tonight (Friday)," Belanger said.

"Please accept our very sincere apologies for this situation, for any inconveniences caused by this situation, which is beyond its control. We thank our customers for their understanding."

Full refunds will be issued to passengers ticket holders who did not take the bus, she said.

Those ticket holders who did take the bus were offered travel vouchers.

Train service between Ottawa and Montreal is going ahead as scheduled.

On 10 Jul 2014, a 26-car CN freight train derailed in Brockville, Ontario, forcing VIA Rail to cancel train service between Toronto and Ottawa for two days.

Train service between Toronto and Montreal was cancelled for one-and-a-half days.

Via situation is 'unprecedented'
Hundreds stranded after collision shuts down Ottawa-Toronto corridor
Hundreds of frustrated holiday weekend travellers fumed after Via Rail cancelled all trains Friday between Toronto and Ottawa, and Toronto and Montreal, after one of its trains collided with a derailed car from a CN freight train.
Of about 300 passengers on Via's train heading to Toronto from Ottawa, one received a minor scratch from the crash that happened around 2 p.m., according to Mylène Bélanger, a spokesperson for Via Rail.
"We are very, very sorry about the inconveniences the situation may cause and this is beyond our control," she said.
"It's an unprecedented situation and it's been a challenge to find motorcoaches to carry all our passengers."
More than 4,000 of its passengers and 16 trains were affected. Via managed to secure 11 buses and some passengers were even transported by taxi, she said.
However, not all passengers travelling Friday managed to hop on a bus.
"No alternate transportation is available and no service will be provided for trains leaving from Montreal to Toronto, Toronto to Montreal and Toronto to Ottawa," according to a Via statement Friday evening. Services between Ottawa and Montreal would continue to operate, however.
Train service was scheduled to resume at 9 a.m. Saturday, after crews clear up the mess from the crash about seven kilometres east of Gananoque.
Passengers booked on trains that were to leave Saturday morning at 6:40 and 6:45 are being scheduled to join trains that depart later in the morning, according to Via Rail's Facebook page.
Philip Mak had boarded a Via Rail train in Toronto Friday when passengers were informed about the derailment.
"Honestly, I'm very annoyed," said Mak, adding that he would be trapped in Toronto for a few hours.
He said he discovered while waiting at the ticket booth that it was unlikely that the train would be departing at all. Mak said he had already made plans in Ottawa, so he and a friend had to find other arrangements.
"We managed to get the last two Greyhound tickets on the 9:15 p.m. bus to Ottawa and get in at 2 a.m.," he said.
"Needless to say, we're extremely unhappy," Mak said. "I was going to the cottage for a relaxation weekend and not off to a very good start."
Jillian Dakin had planned to visit family for the long weekend, but she said it was unclear how long she would be waiting for a bus.
"I'm a little upset, but there's nothing that I can do personally," she said.
Dakin, who had planned on getting off at Fallowfield, said she had called her parents and hoped they would drive to Kingston.
"I'm just hoping my parents will be very generous and come get me. If not, then I would be stuck until I could get a bus," Dakin said.
Others took to social media to vent their frustrations:
Over two hours delayed and not ONE courtesy announcement in the business lounge from @VIA_Rail explaining our options or wait time. Not cool.

12/08/2014 Ottawa Citizen Otrain

O-Train service continued to be suspended Tuesday, a day after a minor derailment near Carleton University involving a northbound train.
Paramedics confirmed they responded just before 3:30 p.m. on Monday to an incident near the university's O-Train stop.
OC Transpo alerted commuters via Twitter that O-Train service was being replaced by Route 107, running every 15 minutes between Greenboro and Bayview stations.
When the train was evacuated following the derailment on Monday, a woman in her 50s requested assistance because she was suffering from a sore neck and back.
She was taken to hospital as a precaution, paramedics said. No other injuries were reported.
Police were also on scene. OC Transpo security were investigating the cause of the derailment, police said.
There were signal issues with the train at about 2:30 p.m., according to a customer service representative at OC Transpo, but those may have been unrelated to the service interruption.
Commuters were told they could take bus route 107, running between Bayview and Greenboro stations every 15 minutes, on Monday afternoon.
OC Transpo said that Otrain service would be suspended for the rest of the day Monday. It did not confirm when service would resume.

Wednesday 13/08/2014 Ottawa Citizen Other

O-Train derailment a mystery
The cause of Monday's minor O-Train derailment near Carleton University remained unknown on Tuesday, even as full service resumed in the morning.
O-Train service resumed at about 8:45 a.m., a day after the minor derailment involving a northbound train near the university's station.
A city spokesperson said on Tuesday that it would be "premature" to discuss possible causes of the derailment, because the cause remained under investigation.
It was unclear how long the investigation will take.
Transit staff worked through Monday night and early Tuesday to re-rail the train, move it to Walkley Yard and conduct inspections and repairs to the track, the city's manager of transit operations Troy Charter said via email.
When the train was evacuated after the derailment, a woman in her 50s requested assistance because she was suffering from a sore neck and back.
She was taken to hospital as a precaution, paramedics said. No other injuries were reported.

Friday 22/08/2014 Ottawa Citizen Smiths Falls Fallowfield Road

Bus Route 72 will replace Route 76
OC Transpo's Route 76 bus will make its last run on Aug. 29, the city said Thursday. The city announced earlier this summer it is retiring Route 76, which travels between Barrhaven and downtown, out of respect for the six people who died in last September's bus-train collision. It will be replaced by the new Route 72, which will start service on Sept. 2. The city decided to change the number after consulting with the victims' families, who all agreed on the move.

Derailement blamed on human error and bad switch

The city is blaming the recent O-Train derailment on human error and a spring switch that didn't close properly.

On Aug. 11, just after 3 p.m., the O-Train travelling north toward Bayview station experienced a partial derailment as it approached Carleton station.

When the train was evacuated after the derailment, a woman in her 50s requested assistance because she was suffering from a sore neck and back. She was taken to hospital as a precaution. No other injuries were reported. The O-Train returned to regular service at 8:45 a.m. the next day, once the necessary repairs and inspections were conducted to the track and signal infrastructure to ensure that train service could safely return to regular operation.

In an interview Friday, OC Transpo general manager John Manconi said there's been no issue with the switch since the incident.

"It's functioning perfectly now," he said.

An investigation has revealed that a spring switch, which is a piece of rail infrastructure that moves to direct a train from one track to another, remained slightly open, causing the train's second and third wheel sets to derail.

The train was travelling at approximately 20 km/h at the time.

"The investigation indicates that the spring switch did not properly close when a previous southbound trip travelled over it, resulting in a piece of the spring switch to become dislodged, resulting in the switch remaining in an open position," Manconi said.

There was also a human factor at play. The operator failed to exit the train and physically inspect the track switch to ensure full alignment of the track after noting a signal light irregularity.

The operator contacted the rail traffic control centre and confirmed that the signal irregularity was not due to another vehicle being in the section of the track.

The operator reduced the travelling speed in accordance with the rules.

When signal irregularities arise, operators are trained to follow Canadian Rail Operating Rules, which include exiting the train to conduct an inspection.

"This procedure was not followed in relation to this occurrence. Transit Services Department has taken the appropriate internal action to ensure adherence to operating procedures," Manconi said.

The operator is on "investigatory leave," which means they continue to be paid.

"We take appropriate action once we have all the facts and information before us," Manconi told the Citizen.

02/09/2014 Ottawa Citizen Alexandria Carlsbad Springs

A fatal collision Sunday evening on the tracks near Carlsbad Springs in east Ottawa delayed 119 passengers en route to Ottawa from Montreal by more than two hours. Train No. 59 struck a trespasser on the tracks near Russell Road at around 6 p.m., said Via Rail spokesman Malcolm Andrews. The tracks were closed while police investigated, but Andrews said the tracks were cleared at around 8:15 p.m.

11/09/2014 Ottawa Citizen Smiths Falls Fallowfield Road

OC Transpo to honour Via crash victims

OC Transpo buses will pull over at 8:47 a.m. on Sept. 18 for a moment of silence — one year after a driver and five passengers were killed when a double-decker bus collided with a Via passenger train.

Flags at all city buildings will be lowered to half-mast that day, while members of OC Transpo's peer support network will be at bus garages and other facilities to support operators, said Craig Watson, president of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 279.

The union will also be publicizing the contact information for its employee assistance program and will let operators wear shorts and green shirts that day in a nod to driver Dave Woodard, whose favourite colour was green.

Besides Woodard, the crash killed passengers Michael Bleakney, 57, Karen Krzyzewski, 53, Rob More, 35, Connor Boyd and Kyle Nash, both 21.

The city announced last month that it was retiring Route 76 out of respect for those who were killed in the 2013 collision.

The new Route 72 commenced service on Sept. 2.

11/09/2014 Ottawa Citizen Otrain

O-Train pitched as name for rail system.

London calls it the "Underground," Montreal calls it the "Métro" and Vancouver calls it the "SkyTrain."

Now Ottawa may soon adopt the name O-Train for its entire innercity rail network.

O-Train was first selected by city staff in 2001 as the name of Ottawa's north-south line between Bayview and Greenboro stations.

Council later adopted the name "Confederation Line" for the new east-west light rail line between Blair and Tunney's Pasture stations during the construction phase, but said at the time that OC Transpo and the transit commission would determine a formal name at a future date. It appears that time has come. The transit commission next week will be asked to endorse a plan that sees the entire network called O-Train, with the east-west line to remain as the Confederation Line and the north-south line to henceforth be called Trillium Line.

If the commission agrees, city council will have the final say.

Staff recommended the name Trillium Line because it is easily read, pronounced and understood in both English and French, and because it makes an indirect reference to Ontario's provincial government (the trillium is Ontario's official flower and is also found in the Ottawa area).

The name Confederation Line was chosen because its alignment and one downtown station bring it close to Parliament Hill, and because the 13 stations across the city mirror Canada's own development as a nation through the federal government's investment in national railways. The name is also easily read, pronounced and understood in both English and French.

The transit commission is also expected to discuss a report on the ongoing O-Train expansion project.

The expanded service was originally due to be completed by fall 2014, but the report contains no official launch date.

A staff report says the city still needs to build the Sawmill Private noise barrier and complete the testing and commissioning of the line before the new expanded service can be put into operation.

The city is also anticipating a sixday shutdown in order to facilitate the switchover from the existing system to the new one.

The expansion includes the addition of two sidings, which are short sections of parallel track where trains in opposite directions can meet and pass each other, and the purchase of six new trains.

Once complete, the north-south line will accommodate 1,900 passengers per hour per direction, compared to 1,100 currently.

City remembers bus-train crash and its victims

Flags will fly at half-mast at city buildings throughout Ottawa on Thursday, and bus drivers will pull over to hold a moment of silence at 8:47 a.m., marking the first anniversary of the bus-train crash that killed six people.

The city began commemorating the anniversary of the deaths at a transit commission meeting on Wednesday, when a moment of silence was held following emotional remarks from Mayor Jim Watson, Barrhaven Coun. Jan Harder and transit chair Diane Deans.

"They were good, honest, decent residents of our city, some so young that most of their lives were yet to be explored, others taken from us while they were in the primes of their lives," Watson said. "And all taken from their families far too soon."

The people who died were driver Dave Woodard, 45, and passengers Michael Bleakney, 57, Karen Krzyzewski, 53, Rob More, 35, Connor Boyd and Kyle Nash, both 21.

A transit meeting had been scheduled for that morning last year but was cancelled when news of that the double-decker bus had crashed into the side of a Via passenger train made its way to city hall.

"For me, Sept. 18 was one of the darkest days of my life. I will never forget the sadness and grief that swept through this city. My heart continues to break for those families who lost loved ones," Deans said.

The tragedy continues to reach all of Barrhaven, Harder said.

"I know that anyone I talk to, wherever I go, people know somebody that was on the 76," she said, of the Route 76 bus, which was replaced by Route 72 earlier this month.

"It's deeply personal ... and that's why I'm pleased that we're having a moment of silence today and that we're doing what the families want, which is lowering the flags tomorrow, and that's all," Harder said, adding she's working with the families of those who died about a memorial in the future.

Flags at city buildings will be at half-mast from sunrise to sunset.

Amalgamated Transit Union Local 279 president Craig Watson said the city and union are trying to respect the families' wishes for the anniversary. "I think whatever their wishes are is the best way to handle it," said Watson, who is frequently in contact with Woodard's family.

To remember Woodard, whose favourite colour was green, some drivers will wear green Thursday, Watson said.

As well, if drivers can safely stop at 8:47 a.m. they will pull over for a moment of silence.

There will be coffee houses and peer supporters ready for drivers who need support, Watson said, and drivers will watch to see if passengers need help. "Drivers will be looking and offering any assistance as needed," Watson said.

The Transportation Safety Board will give an update next Wednesday on its investigation into the crash.

18/09/2014 Ottawa Citizen

Otrain

'O-Train' may soon refer to future lines

On Wednesday the transit commission endorsed using O-Train to refer to both the existing north-south line between Bayview and Greenboro stations, and the future east-west light-rail transit system, between Blair and Tunney's Pasture. The east-west line will still individually called the Confederation Line. The north-south line, which has been known as the O-Train since it opened in 2001, will be known as the Trillium Line. Together, they'll be called the O-Train. There will also be numbers and colours to brand the different lines, to help people navigate them. Confederation is expected to be known as Line 1 and use red as a colour, while Trillium will be Line 2 and use green, according to a presentation given to the commission. "People adapt. They'll use numbering or the colouring, whatever they feel comfortable with," said transit general manager John Manconi.

19/09/2014 Ottawa Citizen

Otrain

Two men arrested in bloody knife fight

Carleton student sees clash from seat on O-Train

Two men were arrested after a bloody knife fight at Carleton University on Thursday.

Police said they were called to the school around 11:30 a.m. after receiving a report of an assault near the O-Train.

Jordan Howran, a Peterborough native majoring in history at Carleton University, said he was sitting on the O-Train when he saw a fight break out.

"I'm from a small town, so I don't usually see that stuff, especially at 12 in the afternoon," he said. "Crazy."

Howran said a heavy-set man pulled a small knife on a thin man and stabbed his arm. When the stabbing victim turned the knife on his attacker, the heavy-set man was then stabbed in the hand as he held onto the knife.

The heavy-set man ran to the OTrain with the knife and boarded in an attempt to escape the other suspect.

"He's standing in the doorway claiming that the other guy has the knife," Howran said.

However, Howran said the heavy-set man hid the knife in the front pouch of his hoodie just before the thin man boarded the train and stood in the doorway so the door wouldn't close.

Howran said people were yelling at the two men to get off the train.

"There was blood everywhere," Howran said.

When police arrived at the station, the thin man started to run away.

Howran said. "Police tackled him."

Police said both men suffered minor injuries.

One of the men was carrying a backpack. Carleton wouldn't confirm whether the two are students.

Ottawa-Montreal Via trains delayed

Pickup truck struck, one person hurt

There was no screeching, no significant disturbance on board, but it was clear we were stopping suddenly.

People travelling by rail between Ottawa and Montreal were being warned of delays Thursday night after a Via Rail train hit a pickup truck near the provincial border.

Via spokeswoman Mylène Bélanger said Train 59, which left Montreal at 4 p.m. Thursday, hit a vehicle at a private crossing near De Beaujeu, Que., about two hours east of Ottawa, at about 5 p.m.

None of the 62 passengers on board the train was hurt, Bélanger said. She said she was told that a person inside the truck was injured but alive.

Local police were investigating.

Rob Annan, a passenger aboard the train, said in an email to the Citizen that he "barely felt anything" when the crash happened. He said he heard "a faint bang" outside the train and then "saw a blur outside the window."

The locomotive engineers immediately hit the brakes, Annan said, but the stop wasn't violent.

"There was no screeching, no significant disturbance on board," he wrote, "but it was clear we were stopping suddenly."

Annan, an Ottawa resident coming home from meetings in Montreal, wrote that Via crews "have been very communicative throughout."

"They told us that we had hit a pickup truck at a private crossing (on a farm), and that the mechanical crew had run back to the incident to check on the situation."

Then, 45 minutes later, he said Via staff announced to passengers that there were no fatalities but that "there were injuries and that police were on the scene."

Bélanger confirmed that the crash happened at a rail crossing on private property. Such crossings normally do not have lights and barriers.

The train was scheduled to arrive in Ottawa at about 6 p.m. but was expected to be delayed by about two hours, Bélanger said, adding that the train's engineers were relieved of their duties because of the traumatic nature of such an incident.

Annan said the atmosphere on board the train was calm.

"I'm very relieved that there were no fatalities, as is everyone else on board," he wrote. "People are very patient. Particularly given that things could have been much worse."

Friday 07/11/2014 Ottawa Citizen Smiths Falls Fallowfield Road

Driver, VIA operator acted properly in Fallowfield incident: OC Transpo boss

It was a sight that would leave many Ottawans anxious: An OC Transpo bus sitting past the safety barrier, closer than comfort to a passing Via Rail train.

The incident, captured in a photo and circulated online, took place at the Fallowfield Road level crossing on Thursday morning — along the same route as last year's crash, in which six people were killed when a bus plowed through a gate and struck the side of a Via train.

However on Thursday, after reviewing the incident, officials emerged to say they were satisfied that both the bus driver and the Via Rail operator had handled things properly.

"We know exactly what occurred out there today," said OC Transpo general manager John Manconi said.

Manconi said Thursday afternoon after Transpo, Via and city traffic engineers had time to go over the relevant material in the incident.

The bus was not speeding. "We had a manager on the vehicle on the second level (as a passenger). He witnessed everything."

The Transpo official said the bus was caught in a traffic lineup at a red light. The light turned green, traffic started to advance slowly, but the lights turned amber before the bus was able to cross the tracks.

"The operator went (past a painted stop line for buses) and made the decision to brake, as you have to make a decision when a light turns amber on you, and stopped well in advance of the tracks. I know some of the pictures out there look like it was very close (but) estimates are it was about 12 to 15 feet from the tracks.

"He absolutely made the right decision."

Officials are satisfied and don't intend to investigate further, Manconi said.

Earlier in the day, Craig Watson, president of the Amalgamated Transit Union local, said the driver of the OC Transpo bus "did everything he needed to do for the safety of the passengers."

Meanwhile, Via said in a news release that railway crossing signals at Jockvale and Greenbank roads malfunctioned Thursday morning after an "electronic component" failed.

The crossings went into "fail-safe mode", crossing lights and bells activated, and gates lowered. Repairs were made and the crossing signals returned to normal operation.

Monday 10/11/2014 Ottawa Citizen Smiths Falls Fallowfield Road

Warning on bus safety at Via crossing

Transport Canada wants changes at Fallowfield station after close call

The danger of stopping under the railway crossing gate arms puts the road users at threat of coming into contact with an approaching train.

Transport Canada says there's a threat to safety at the Fallowfield Road railway crossing, after an OC Transpo bus stopped under the crossing gate arm close to a passing Via Rail train.

In a letter to transit general manager John Manconi dated Friday, a railway safety inspector for Transport Canada said he believes "a threat to safe railway operations exists" at the crossing.

"The danger of stopping under the railway crossing gate arms puts the road users at threat of coming into contact with an approaching train," railway safety inspector John Valencik said in the letter.

"In addition, if a bus stops beyond a railway crossing gate and does not clear the other side of the crossing, there is also a threat that the bus can come into contact with a passing train."

On Thursday, an OC Transpo bus stopped under the railway crossing arm and, according to Valencik's letter, was "in close proximity to a passing Via train."

The incident was captured in a photo and circulated online.

The bus was along the same route as last fall's crash in which six people were killed after an OC Transpo bus drove through the gate and struck the side of a Via train.

The Transport Canada letter asks the city to advise by Nov. 21 how it intends to resolve "these hazards or conditions."

In response, the city is reviewing its procedures and directives for drivers approaching railway crossings, city manager Kent Kirkpatrick said in a memo.

The city is also working with Public Works to "assess all aspects of the specific railway crossing at Fallowfield Road," he said. City staff will "identify any possible mitigation options" and respond to Transport Canada's notice by the deadline, he said.

After reviewing the incident, officials said Thursday that both the bus driver and the Via Rail operator had handled things properly.

Manconi said Thursday afternoon that the bus was not speeding, and the operator stopped well in advance of the tracks after a traffic light turned amber. He said officials were satisfied and didn't intend to investigate further.

The Transport Canada letter said that a "threat," under the Railway Safety Act, is "a hazard or condition that could reasonably be expected to develop into a situation in which a person could be injured or made to be ill or damage could be caused to the environment or property."

Fix needed for safety 'threat' at rail crossings

Transport Canada warning hints at possible underpass or overpass

What more has to happen for this city to separate the railway crossings in the growing community of South Nepean as was originally intended?

A Transport Canada inspector has warned that passengers, both on a city bus and a train, along with the bus driver could have been at risk in an incident last week at the Fallowfield rail crossing.

The September 2013 tragic crash between an OC Transpo bus and a Via Rail train near Woodroffe Avenue resulted in six deaths and dozens injured. Last week the community experienced a near miss when a public transit bus came into contact with the rail-crossing arm "in close proximity" to an approaching train.

And now, a Transport Canada inspector has informed the city that the Fallowfield crossing is a "threat to safe railway operations," and that at last week's event, "bus passengers, train passengers and the operator could have been at risk."

The federal department gave the city two weeks "until Nov. 21" to come up with a way to "resolve these hazards or conditions." City officials refused to comment on Monday after the letter arrived by registered-mail Friday evening. So much for OC Transpo boss John Manconi's assurances that everyone involved in the incident behaved properly and that the city was so satisfied it didn't intend to investigate further.

City manager Kent Kirkpatrick wrote to councillors on Saturday that "OC Transpo is currently reviewing its procedures and directives to drivers approaching railway crossings and is also working with Public Works staff to assess all aspects of the specific railway crossing at Fallowfield Road."

What driver procedures need to change? The city already commissioned a study about whether transit buses should stop at all railway crossings, and the response from that report was a resounding no. The (albeit dated) research shows that making buses automatically stop at crossings actually increases the chances of an accident.

What the Transport Canada missive is surely hinting at is the need for a separated grade crossing (although the lack of specifics about what exactly at the crossing is a "threat" to safety is a bit frustrating).

Veteran Ottawa politician Bob Chiarelli, for one, thinks the measure is well overdue. Asked about whether he thought a level crossing was a mistake, the Ontario energy minister said he was "always very concerned" about that intersection when he was mayor.

The city, federal government and Via "should just bite the bullet," Chiarelli said. "They should put their heads together, and they should grade separate those facilities."

He even hinted that the provincial government might throw in some cash for the project if asked: "We work with municipal governments across the province to support their transit projects," he said. "There's no request at this time."

Chiarelli's concern over the at-grade crossing is a tad puzzling considering he was the mayor when council unanimously agreed in 2004 to scrap its original plans to build two underpasses at Woodroffe and Fallowfield after an estimated \$40-million price tag ballooned to \$110 million due to poor soil conditions.

Canadian National Railway had insisted it "would not permit permanent at-grade crossings at Fallowfield Road and Woodroffe Avenue" because of "current and future safety concerns" over the amount of cross-track traffic at those locations.

But somehow, city staff convinced CN that a wider Woodroffe, with an adjacent Transitway extension, would be safe enough with a crossing and signal, especially as the opening of the Fallowfield Via station meant the trains would move through more slowly than in the past. If Transport Canada had any objections, it didn't voice them at the time.

Concerns were raised again in 2010, when Via took over the track from CN, and commissioned a safety assessment report on the crossing. The report's authors stated that the volume of traffic indicated the need for an underpass or overpass, suggesting the city re-evaluate a requirement for grade separation.

If we're looking for blame, there's plenty to go around: the Chiarelli-led council that allowed the at-grade crossing in the first place (although Chiarelli pointed out he "wasn't mayor forever" and vowed the crossing would have been grade separated if he had been in power longer); CN for acquiescing back in 2004; the city, which may or may not have revisited the amount of cross-track traffic after Via raised the concern in 2010; the federal government, which seems to have few if any standards for when a crossing is to be grade-separated (who's in charge, anyway?).

But assigning blame won't fix the problem. What we need is a permanent solution to the ongoing concern over these rail crossings.

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Thursday

13/11/2014

Ottawa Citizen

Smiths Falls

Fallowfield Road

Need rail crossing help, says mayor

All partners have to come to the table. We can't do it all ourselves. It's a very challenging question for municipalities.

When it comes to building overpasses or underpasses at Via Rail crossings, Mayor Jim Watson is clear about one thing: the city won't be able to pay the \$100 million-plus price tag on its own.

"There's certainly a level of frustration and concern," said Watson of the ongoing issues over Via crossings in Barrhaven. But if the crossings do have to be grade-separated, "all partners have to come to the table. We can't do it all ourselves. It's a very challenging question for municipalities."

The mayor spoke for the first time Wednesday about an alarming-sounding letter from a Transport Canada inspector to the city in regards to a close call last week when an OC Transit bus came into contact with the rail-crossing arm "in close proximity" to an approaching train at the Fallowfield crossing. The federal inspector wrote that the crossing is a "threat to safe railway operations," and that at last week's event, "bus passengers, train passengers and the operator could have been at risk."

(The 2013 crash of an OC Transpo bus and a Via train that killed six occurred at a nearby crossing, where the Transitway runs alongside Woodroffe Avenue.)

The federal department gave the city until Nov. 21 to come up with a way to "resolve these hazards or conditions." And Watson said he doesn't want to be "premature" in discussing options until he hears back from city manager Kent Kirkpatrick about what might be done to mitigate the worries about the Barrhaven crossings. Watson suggested that the city might investigate whether one solution might be activating the barrier sooner.

Via Rail officials have said in the past that Barrhaven is one of the only places in the country where the passenger train service runs right through a suburb. More than a decade ago, when the city was planning to widen Woodroffe, there was a plan to build underpasses at both the Fallowfield and Woodroffe, each wide enough to accommodate the roads and the Transitway.

But when poor soil conditions meant estimated costs would skyrocket from \$40 million to more than \$110 million, the city convinced Canadian National Railway (then-owner of the track) to accept at-grade crossings instead.

If the city had to find more than \$110 million on its own, "we couldn't do it," said Watson.

Kingston developer Henk Doornekamp is about to buy the historic outer railway station and property on Montreal Street.

Once the deal with CN Railway is completed, Doornekamp hopes to move the decaying limestone walls to the city's Douglas R. Fluhrer Park, where it will be restored to its original form and become rental office space.

"We will transport the ruins with the least amount of demolition and rebuild it on the site," he told the Whig-Standard.

"I'm hoping the city will see the merit in relocating it on the Wellington Street extension, whatever that becomes, more importantly as a feature of Doug Fluhrer Park."

Doornekamp said he first approached CN Railway with his offer to buy the 148-year-old former Grand Trunk station about 18 months ago.

CN has been embroiled in a decades-long battle with the City of Kingston over the building's state of repair.

The abandoned station was badly damaged in a fire in 1996, then covered with a blue tarp that deteriorated, allowing water to seep in and destroy much of the building's structure.

CN capped the top of the ruined walls and secured them with steel bracing in 2011, even though the city took the company to court to have it pay for a new roof.

"Basically, I approached CN with my idea. Between them and the city, they're wasting a lot of staff time and legal dollars. It was just a thought I had. When I did approach them, we did get an immediate response," Doornekamp said.

"At the heart of our deal, the train station can't stay there."

He would like to place the building at the south end of Douglas R. Fluhrer Park, which is situated beside the inner harbour.

It would sit across Wellington Street from the derelict Imperial Oil Building, another historic limestone building Doornekamp purchased from the city last year.

He said the location makes sense historically because the parkland is a former railway spur line that ran through the heart of Kingston's downtown.

"We will be resurrecting it to its former glory, still on a train line. That way it's respectful of its former use. I see the park area in real need of revitalization. This could be the anchor tenant for that," he said.

"It will bring people to that area. We're already bringing people to the Woolen Mill. But there's a disjoint. The growth can continue and it might lead to the developing of the Davis Tannery site next."

Doornekamp characterized his talks with the city as "preliminary with no commitment."

He has spoken with city staff as well as Mayor Mark Gerretsen.

But he said the plan requires a deal with the city that takes into account the considerable investment he will be making.

"Everything has to happen at the right price to allow us the budget," he said. "I would like to convert it into a high-end office space, but I'm open to suggestions. It's got to be rental. There's got to be revenue after the fact."

Despite the federal and provincial heritage designations on the building, Doornekamp expects to receive approval for the move.

Workers will use the steel reinforcements "to clamp the walls and pick it up and move it."

Doornekamp didn't say how much he paid for the railway station and the land, which is known to be contaminated.

In 2004, city council turned down an offer to buy the station from CN for a dollar.

A staff report suggested at the time it would cost nearly \$4 million to repair the building and clean up the contamination.

Doornekamp's ABNA Investment Ltd. has restored a number of historic buildings in Kingston, including the Woolen Mill, also on Kingston's inner harbour, and the Smith and Robinson Building, formerly the S&R department store, at the corner of Princess and Ontario streets.

Built in 1856, the Grand Trunk station is significant because it was used by Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, in his travels between Kingston and Ottawa. King George VI also arrived there on a visit to Kingston in 1939.

Doornekamp said the sale will go through even if he can't reach a deal with the city.

"I'm taking the building, regardless. But my vision is to move it," he said.

"I've signed all our documents, but (CN) haven't come back to us. In principle, we have a deal. We figure it will close early in the new year."

City rejects changes to level crossings

Upcoming report could force a reassessment

Engineering experts studying the level rail crossings in Ottawa are recommending that the city and Via Rail reassess the need for grade separation at crossings in the Barrhaven area.

But until that report is released later this year, the city says it will do nothing different at the crossings.

News of the recommendation to study the grade-separated crossings was buried in a City of Ottawa letter to Transport Canada inspector John Valencik over a possible "threat to safety" that exists at the Fallowfield rail crossing.

On Nov. 6, an OC Transpo bus stopped just past the "stop bar" painted on the roadway, and came in contact with the activated crossing gate arms. About a minute later, a slow-moving Via train passed in front of the stationary bus.

That event led the Transport Canada inspector on Nov. 7 to warn the city in writing that "a threat to safe railway operations exists" at the crossing. The inspector gave the city until Nov. 21 to advise the federal agency how it intended to "resolve these hazards or conditions."

The city's response is to do nothing - or very little, other than taking minor steps such as re-painting the stop lines on the road for the buses (which has already been completed).

"We cannot concur with your opinion that a threat to railway safety existed based on the November 6th occurrence," city manager Kent Kirkpatrick wrote to Transport Canada in a seven-page letter.

In the city's opinion, while the bus crossed the stop line, "at no time was there any threat of the bus coming into contact with the passing train," wrote Kirkpatrick.

That might be true, but the city's response does not address whether the high-volume traffic over the crossings is generally safe. Nor, to be fair, is it clear whether the Transport Canada inspector was indicating in his original warning whether the crossing in question was a "threat to safety" to bus and train passengers at all times, or just during the Nov. 6 event.

But this may be a moot point if new recommendations due out by the end of this year call for gradeseparation at one or more of the Via level crossings in the Barrhaven area.

Kirkpatrick's letter refers to a "detailed safety assessment report" that the city and Via ordered up as part of the so-called "action plan" to deal with malfunctioning crossing signals in south Nepean.

According to Kirkpatrick, the city is "aware" that the draft report "recommends that consideration be given to conducting engineering and economic analysis studies to reassess grade separations variables and feasibility in this area."

This recommendation is hardly a surprise given that CN Rail, which owned the track prior to 2010, had wanted an overpass or underpass at both the Fallowfield and Woodroffe crossings back in 2001. The city convinced CN to drop its insistence on grade separation after the price for the crossings was estimated at more than \$110 million.

At the time, CN said grade-separation was required at intersections with high volumes of traffic measured by a "cross product," which is simply the number of trains going through the crossing each day multiplied by the number of vehicles using the road. When that number is more than 200,000, safety standards say it's time to separate the two streams of traffic.

Kirkpatrick's letter stated that the average daily traffic for Fallowfield is 21,766 vehicles based on a 2013 traffic count.

According to Via, at least 21 trains cross Fallowfield every day. That's a cross product of 457,086 - or more than twice the industry measure for required a grade-separated crossing.

Steam Train Plan Chugs Along by Anastasia Philopoulos

Tourists and Wakefielders alike could see a smaller and locally operated version of the steam train up and running by 2016.

We're the only project so far that has an operator interested in their proposal, said Marc Fournier to the sound of applause.

One of three projects currently being considered by la Compagnie de chemin de fer de l'Outaouais, the Wakefield Steam Train Group's (WSTG) country style train proposal was presented to the community on Nov. 25 at the Wakefield Community Centre.

With the deadline for its business proposal fast approaching, WSTG President Fournier wanted local folks, about 35 of whom were gathered, to get a sense of the project.

It's such a simple operation and that's really one of our strongest points, Fournier told the crowd. After a quick recap of the steam train's history and the subsequent rail damage that brought the symbolic steam engine to a halt, Fournier detailed the current project's plans with the help of his assembled panel which included Neil Faulkner, James Sisstie and Jess Harris.

At the moment, the WSTG has Zins Beauchesne and Associates, a Montreal firm that specializes in tourist excursions, crunching numbers and doing research for a solid business proposal to be submitted by the Dec. 24 deadline.

The new trip would last an hour and a half in total, starting in Wakefield with a stop at Morrison's Quarry for 30 minutes and returning to the village. Running from early spring until late fall, the new train would accommodate about 150 people per ride, a much smaller volume than in the past. With multiple trips planned per day, Fournier explained to the crowd that the reduced number of tourists could be easier for the village to accommodate, especially when it came to infrastructure like parking and public toilets.

Entertainment

Dinner would no longer be an option on the train and food would only be served if the locomotive was chartered for special events. Fournier added that Theatre Wakefield and the Fairbairn House were collaborating to come up with historic presentations and on-board entertainment. And while Fourier is not ready to reveal any names yet, a local businessperson has submitted a letter of intent to operate the train if it came to Wakefield.

At this point, the cost of the train is estimated at around \$4 million, with tickets ranging between \$17 to \$22 depending on whether it's a student, senior or adult fare.

Questions from the 35 guests in attendance ranged from the project's viability to parking, and whether Chelsea would be involved.

Possibly in the long term, there could be options to go up to Chelsea but right now we don't want to lose out on getting the train back, Fournier said. That's why we're keeping the project very small and to the point.

Parking

James Sisstie, who owns Expeditions Radisson, explained parking was still something being discussed but that a number of options were being considered including using municipal land. Also, there's been a number of private land owners who have express interest in parking, he added.

One woman did ask whether the proposed project was a good investment for taxpayers. Fournier answered that the business proposal being put together by the Montreal firm would address economic stimulus but it was owner of the Wakefield Mill Hotel and Spa, Robert Milling, whose comments made the clear link from the train to its economic benefits.

I wouldn't have done the Mill if it weren't for the steam train. It was the only thing in town that was working back then, Milling told the crowd, adding his business created 90 jobs in the village. Just on that one investment, the economic activity has been north of \$50 million from 2000 until now.

27/12/2014 Brockville Recorder Brockville Brockville

Tunnel Damage Called Minor

Brockville Ontario - The damage done to the city's historic railway tunnel by last week's truck accident is "minor" and should be easily repaired, says the head of the railway tunnel committee.

"I think it's business as usual. It looks like minor damage. I think the insurance company will take care of it," said Councillor David LeSueur, chairman of the Brockville railway tunnel advisory committee.

In an email to city officials and tunnel committee members, copied to The Recorder and Times, city operations director Conal Cosgrove confirms Lesley White, the city's manager of strategic initiatives, "has contacted the City's insurance broker, who will assist us in ensuring that the cost of the repairs are covered by the truck driver's insurance."

That came as a relief to railway tunnel committee member Doug Grant, who had expressed concern about the damage caused by the mishap to the historic tunnel. "That's the important thing, that somebody's going to pay for it, other than the committee," said Grant.

The concerns came after a driverless flatbed truck shot out of control down East Market Street Friday morning, narrowly avoiding a catastrophe before coming to a stop with the front end of the cab hanging over the retaining wall of the tunnel.

No one was injured in the incident.

But there was concern about the damage done to the retaining wall, which underwent a comprehensive upgrade that included re-pointing in recent years.

The cab of the truck slammed down on the top of the wall as the wheels went over the edge, coming to a sudden stop atop the structure.

The impact caused some mortar to fall out between stones that were re-pointed two years ago and appeared to leave a crack on the flat surface at the top of the wall.

The driver of the vehicle, whose name was not released by city police, was charged under the Highway Traffic Act with failing to take precautions to ensure the vehicle would not be set in motion.

LeSueur and Grant were also worried about damage done to the wooden slats in front of the tunnel's entrance by a front-end loader needed to get the truck's wheels over the wall.

"That's a project that I'm in the middle of working on. We're replacing boards and we're going to do some more," said Grant.

The committee has hired contractors to replace the wooden deck and work will resume in the spring, he added.

The revitalization of the historic railway tunnel remains a key part of Brockville's capital plan.

In 2013, council enshrined a contribution of \$300,000 toward the the railway tunnel revitalization project, over a four-year period starting this year, on the city's list of capital priorities.

"It's all going quite well," said LeSueur, who hopes to present new drawings showing "an artistic conception" of the project early in the new year.

Ron Zajac