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Leaders take stand before railway hearing

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While Barrington area leaders didn't testify at the Illinois General Assembly's Railroad Safety Committee hearing at the Thompson Center, they had a chance to air their views about Canadian National Railway's proposed purchase of the EJ & E railroad. Barrington Village President Karen Darch, Advocate Good Shepherd Hospital Communications Director Mike Deering, School District 220 Superintendent Tom Leonard and Barrington Fire Chief Jim Arie told a press conference prior to last week's hearing that increased freight train traffic on the railroad would cause emergency response and safety problems for residents and the 9,000-plus students attending Community Unit School District 220 schools. About 30 people from Barrington attended the hearing and the press conference on Jan. 31. Leonard said District 220 school buses cross the EJ & E railroad over 800 times per day and Barrington High School is 600 feet from the tracks. Arie and Deering said delaying response times for emergency vehicles waiting for freight trains to clear railroad crossings can make the difference whether someone lives or dies.

Canadian National's projections indicate freight traffic through Barrington would increase from about five trains per day to about 20 on average. In Hoffman Estates, train trips will increase near Shoe Factory Road and Route 59. The Ottawa-based company plans to buy 198 miles of EJ&E tracks in the Chicago area from U.S. Steel for \$300 million. Unresolved is the impact the sale would have on the proposed STAR Line, which would run partly on the EJ&E tracks.

The committee held a public hearing, calling officials from the Illinois Department of Transportation, the Illinois Commerce Commission and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning to testify about concerns the agencies have about the purchase. George Weber, acting director of IDOT's bureau of railroads, testified that that freight traffic in the Chicago area is expected to continue to increase and representatives on the committee worried that shifting freight traffic to the EJ & E would only provide temporary relief to other area railways. Randy Blankenhorn, of CMAP, said the agency will urge the U.S. Surface Transportation Board—which must approve of the purchase—to require Canadian National to create a 10-year projection. The agency's purpose is to analyze regional impacts of major development and infrastructure proposals.

State representatives on the committee included Chair Elaine Nekritz, D-57th, Ed Sullivan Jr., R-51st, William Davis, D-30th, Mark Beaubien, R-52nd, and Sidney Mathias, R-53rd.

The committee did not make any rulings.

"Communities like Barrington do not have the infrastructure to deal with the train traffic increase the purchase would bring," Darch said. She said the CN only projects freight traffic patterns for three years and it's likely after that time the number of freight trains traveling through the 80 communities will increase.