

What's the Scoop...? More Trains, Coal Trains, Oil Trains...?

by Dave Earling

Over the past year or more you have all heard about, read about, or talked about the ongoing news of more trains, coal trains and oil trains. So what is all the fuss about and what's going on to address the prospect of additional trains into the state and more specifically, Edmonds?

To begin with, a bit of background... many of you will recall at one time we, along with the State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), had plans to move the ferry dock to south of the Port, a project forecast to cost \$238M. We had \$80-90M obligated for the project... and then... the 2008 recession hit, and... all of that money was de-obligated to other construction-ready projects across the state and nation.

As a part of that project, a study was completed in 2005 that projected long-term train traffic through Edmonds to increase beyond the approximately 35 trains a day currently coming through our city. The study concluded that by 2020, we would have about 70 trains coming through town, and by 2030 the number would approach 104 trains per day.

Even with our current 35 trains a day we shut down our two at-grade-crossings (Dayton and Main) to the waterfront for a total of an hour and a half in a 24-hour period. If the 104 trains a day projection were correct, we would lose access to and from the waterfront for up to four hours a day! Losing access to and from the Port, State Highway (SR 104), the Ferry system and the Senior Center for four hours per day is clearly unacceptable to the citizens of Edmonds, WSDOT and the region.

Enter Coal Trains and Oil Trains! Yep, more train traffic!

The news of Coal Trains began about a year and a half ago. Much of the discussion is driven by coal being readily available in Wyoming and Montana and having markets thirsting for coal in Asia, specifically China. The discussion is further elevated with refining plants proposed in Washington and Oregon, and more specifically, the proposed Cherry Point coal refining project near Bellingham. If that project were to be approved, we could have an additional 9-18 train trips through Edmonds.

Yes, we already have coal trains coming through Edmonds as they make their way to existing facilities in British Columbia. Many have legitimate concerns over environmental and health issues related to coal dust and even the ultimate burning of coal. The other main concern centers on the length of the coal trains; it is not unusual to have coal trains in excess of 100 cars. I have counted up to 116 cars, shutting down access to Dayton and Main for 6-7 minutes. So, with an increase in coal train trips, we would see not only a higher frequency of shut-downs at Dayton and Main, but also increased concern over the worrisome health issues that must be addressed.

And now, the most recent conversation adds the potential of Oil Trains to the mix. The Oil Train issue comes as a result of expanding drilling of oil from the Baaken oil in North Dakota and that huge new source of oil finding its way to market. I want to emphasize this issue is just beginning to surface and we do not have extensive information as of yet. However, what's clear is that there will be more potential train volume concerns as well as new environmental issues.

The potential for an oil spill happening in Edmonds or along Puget Sound would be a larger-than-life, catastrophic regional and state event. As you may know oil trains are coming through Edmonds now. I

recently counted 106 oil cars in one train; again, another 6-7 minute shutdown of the at-grade-crossings.

Our lobbyists in Olympia recently attended a meeting and briefing called by the Department of Ecology (DOE) and the Utilities and Transportation Commission (UTC). They reported that we currently have 19 oil trains coming into the state per week. As the North Dakota oil wells and production grow, we could have 59-90 oil trains coming into the state each week. (Emphasize again, PRELIMINARY information and oil trains entering the STATE, not just Edmonds)

I recognize I have downloaded a whole lot of information to you in this writing. In my next column, I will review with you what work is being done locally and at the state and federal levels to address the whole train volume/safety issue. We are moving on a variety of fronts and working the issues with our legislators and other state and federal leaders.

If you would, please mark your calendars for October 2nd at 6:30 pm for a Train Volume/Safety Town Hall Meeting in the Plaza Room on the top floor of the Library. Watch for more information as the date draws closer.