



Matthew A. Pacifico
MAYOR

1301 Twelfth Street, Ste. 101
Altoona, PA 16601
814.949.2476

Railroad Safety – Testimony by Matthew Pacifico, Mayor of the City of Altoona

Chairman Langerholc, Chairman Flynn, and members of the Senate Transportation Committee. Hello, my name is Matt Pacifico and I am the proud Mayor of the City of Altoona. On behalf of the residents of Altoona, I thank you for this opportunity to testify to the Committee today regarding the railway transport of hazardous materials.

Altoona was founded by the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1848 to build a hub to expand their railroad operations. Central to the passenger traffic between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, the railroad shop in Altoona was, and continues to be considered, one of the largest and most versatile locomotive shops in the world. While the use of trains as a mode of transportation has declined, the City has invested significant effort in maintaining the legacy, history, and cultural significance of the railroad. The railroad, even today, remains not just a transportation outlet, but a source of pride and connection for the City, its history, and its residents.

So, to say that Altoona has a strong railroad heritage would be a gross understatement. We also have a vested interest in today's hearing because the Norfolk Southern mainline runs right through the heart of downtown Altoona. In addition, its proximity to residential areas makes it necessary for us to be proactive in protecting not only our City's citizens, but those in surrounding municipalities from hazardous conditions.

Upon hearing of this serious event, Altoona officials and citizens immediately felt compelled to address the issue, to mitigate the repetition of this event here in our City. We have identified several concerns that I would like to bring to your attention today:

1. What are the effects of cutting staff positions at Norfolk, specifically related to track and hot box sensor maintenance? In an article on freightwaves.com, it is reported that Norfolk cut electronic leader positions in the derailment region from 5 positions to 0 positions. The positions were responsible for hot box sensor maintenance. This work was now transferred to less qualified and less experienced workers. Altoona is in the same region as East Palestine so we are equally affected by these cuts.
2. What are the policies on how to respond when a train receives a hot box sensor alert? Is the train supposed to stop, do they have to check with upper management, taking away critical response time? If they simply ignore it the likelihood of derailment increases.
3. Most of the tank cars that carry hazardous materials are owned by chemical manufacturers or leased. What are the maintenance requirements for these cars and who oversees the process to ensure maintenance on cars is being performed correctly?





4. What are the effects of cutting personnel on trains? In all walks of industry, fewer personnel results in less oversight and attention to potentially harmful or dangerous situations.
5. Are trains being made longer to cut costs? Are longer trains safer than shorter ones, or is the reason for longer trains simply to cut costs at the expense of safety?
6. There are Codes of Federal Regulations on shipping hazardous materials by rail. Who oversees this to ensure railroads are following regulations, and does the reduction in staff affect the monitoring of these regulations?
7. It seems like it is money over safety with Norfolk. In East Palestine, as soon as the cars were removed, Norfolk put down new tracks to get trains moving again. The proper remediation work was not completed, giving the appearance that Norfolk values money over safety.

Norfolk Southern has demonstrated a lack of communication with local emergency management or elected officials, when it comes to accidents that occur on their right-of-way. As an example, on September 20, 2014, there was a 17-car derailment right in downtown Altoona that we were unaware of until the news media contacted us for comment. We have had other derailments in Altoona on the mainline during my time as mayor, and we were fortunate that the cars were not hauling hazardous materials. But what happens when a derailment occurs here like we saw in East Palestine, Ohio? The absence of communication between Norfolk Southern and elected officials or local emergency management coordinators is unacceptable and this lack of transparency and communication needs to end.

We are a community built on the rail industry. Historically, city leaders and emergency service agencies have had excellent relationships with the rail company's local leadership. Because the mainline between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh goes through our downtown, we thoroughly train our emergency service personnel and hazmat team to handle situations on the rail lines. We would embrace a relationship with Norfolk Southern, one in which we would communicate regularly, rather than just at times of crisis. This would be welcome at all levels in our community, most importantly with our emergency service personnel. This is absolutely critical to preparing for, or even preventing, a minor incident, or a major one.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify before the Committee. I'm hopeful that we can learn from this horrific accident and can foster better communication with Norfolk Southern officials moving forward so we can continue the partnership that we've had with the rail industry in Altoona for the last 175 years.

