

# Local concerns follow Ohio train derailment

Municipalities along tracks used by CSX seek updated emergency response plan

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SAUGERTIES, N.Y. >> Ulster County municipal leaders are concerned that something worse than the train derailment involving hazardous materials in East Palestine, Ohio, could happen locally.

The Feb. 3 derailment in Ohio caused toxic chemicals to be released and burned, resulting in evacuations of nearby residents.

The Saugerties Village Board on Tuesday, Feb. 21, fully endorsed a letter asking Ulster County Executive Jen Metzger to have the county provide an updated emergency response plan covering all seven municipalities along the railroad tracks used by CSX trains.

In addition to the village and town of Saugerties, the municipalities along the 39.65 miles of CSX railroad tracks are the city of Kingston and the towns of Ulster, Esopus, Lloyd and Marlboro.

“We would like to bring to your attention that the Ulster County Department of Emergency Services is currently updating the Ulster Count Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan,” officials wrote. “They have requested that the municipalities provide a listing of locations where hazardous materials are stored within their boundaries. It is important to note that the CSX trains contain hazardous materials that the municipalities cannot monitor on a daily basis.”

Village Mayor Bill Murphy said the letter was important to show that communities along the tracks have a heightened sense of awareness about how important a strong response plan is for emergencies that involve toxic and explosive material.

“I’m sure Saugerties has greater concerns than other communities ... and there’s probably other communities that have similar concerns to what we have,” he said. “I think there’s power in numbers ... in getting all the communities in on (the letter). Maybe it was the (Feb. 4) incident that put this over the edge.”

Murphy was referring to a three-hour shutdown of a main crossing at Ulster Avenue due to a loose rail.

Saugerties Town Supervisor Fred Costello said the hazardous material with plumes similar to Palestine would easily envelope populated areas such as the village with its 3,899 residents or Barclay Heights, which has nearly the same amount of people. He added that there are many creeks and stream crossings where hazardous materials could go into water that has a short trip to the Hudson River.

“I think the challenges of containing an event would be complicated by the water and bringing equipment to contain an event would be complicated by the water and the lack of geographic near the track,” he said.

Among incidents that still echo in Saugerties came on Aug. 28, 1975, during a train derailment at the Warren Myers Road crossing near Mount Marion. According to a Freeman story, that derailment included an overturned tank car containing more than 30,462 gallons of butadiene inhibite gas that burst into flames.

“A mile-wide ‘danger zone’ was established ... while volunteer firemen from 10 area companies poured water on an overturned railroad tank car containing ... highly explosive compressed gas,” reporter Jon Powers wrote.

That crash at 11 p.m. started a blaze that was near a natural gas line, which still exists today, and lasted through the afternoon the following day.

“The crash site itself resembled a battlefield,” wrote Powers. “The 28 cars, along with several sections of eight-foot track, were strewn along the rail line. A cloud of thick black smoke poured from the wreckage, blocking out the sun above.”

Ulster Town Supervisor James Quigley was equally as concerned about the potential for loss of life and inability to handle emergency situations.

“West Palestine, Ohio, has stirred up a number of citizens in Ulster County in communities that are along railroad tracks and they’re asking for answers to the question, ‘Can it happen here?’” he said. “The supervisors have been contacted by various constituents questioning our townships’ ... ability and preparedness to react to this.”

Quigley added that the county emergency management plan for dealing with large-scale threats such as a train derailment with hazardous materials is not provided to municipal governments, even though having the town supervisors and village mayors as the primary point of contact for public information.

“(The plan) is outside the town government purview because the fire districts are independent districts,” he said. “We are asking to have to have the plan reviewed and updated, and to make a public announcement to the community that there is in fact a plan that has been in place for several years.”

Metzger was not available for comment Tuesday. A spokesperson for her was unable to provide information about the status of any county plan to respond to a railroad accident

similar to the West Palestine derailment.