

July 16, 2007

Albany Common Council  
City Hall  
Albany, NY 12210

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen:

I'm Dr. Steve Breyman, Executive Director of the statewide Citizens' Environmental Coalition, based here in Albany, just a few blocks west of here. I serve in this position while on leave as Associate Professor of Science and Technology Studies at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. CEC works to prevent pollution, clean up toxic and radiological waste, protect environmental justice and health, and move NYS towards chemical policy reform.

I have been a student of chemical security issues since September 11, 2001, that day that has affected our lives so deeply, in so many ways.

Ironically, I'm here this evening to briefly discuss one important area where our lives have NOT demonstrably changed since September 11: the routing of cargo trains pulling hazardous loads.

Believe it or not, cargo trains today are hauling very dangerous materials following more or less the same routes with the same loads as they did before September 11, 2001.

I spent most of last week in Minneapolis at a training. My flight was routed through O'Hare both ways, so I had to board four separate aircraft to get there and back. Each time my carry-on baggage was thoroughly screened, and I had to shed my footgear and run it through the X-ray machine.

We may moan and groan about the security measures. For example, I do not like having to surrender my disposable lighter or dump my large bottle of drinking water. But we all agree these inconveniences are a reasonable price to pay for increased security. And we all agree increased transportation security is necessary in this day and age.

So why should it be any different for the cargo rail industry? Why has it been by and large exempt from all the adjustments in practices, policies, and behaviors the rest of us have made in the wake of that terrible day? Frankly, I don't know. But the good news here is that you now, thanks to the efforts of your colleague Dominic Calsolaro, have the opportunity to get the cargo rail lines to behave as if your security and health mattered.

At precisely the same time insurgents in Iraq are now using chlorine gas bombs to attack US troops, much larger chlorine gas bombs as rail cars regularly roll by our schools, homes, and workplaces in Albany and elsewhere across the country.

And, of course, there are many other materials we also need to have rerouted including, for example, propane gas. No one is saying that we don't need propane—indeed, my oven, hotwater heater, and clothes dryer all run on propane—but only that we don't need the stuff on rail cars directly adjacent to sensitive and vulnerable populations and institutions. Had the derailment that took place in Oneida in March taken place in Albany—the train was on its way to the CSXT yard in Selkirk from Buffalo—the consequences might have been considerably mor dramatic, including an evacuation of much of the City.

I understand the Common Council will continue to discuss this ordinance. I'm happy to be of service as you consider it further. Other communities like Washington DC have already taken the common sense step of removing hazardous rail cars from the vicinities of their schools and playgrounds. I trust Albany will do the same, and soon, BEFORE a disaster.