

After the Tragedy: The Lac-Mégantic Rail Bypass Project

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This presentation is based on a study commissioned by the regional public health authority, which combines mixed data collected ten years after the accident. It focuses on the shifts in public attitudes toward this infrastructure project, which was initially perceived as a unifying initiative. Key milestones in the project's impact assessment process are presented to trace how a project initially intended to support the recovery of the population has, over time, become a source of controversy. Subsequently, the presentation is highlighting specific issues related to the project's environmental assessment, including the overlap between Quebec and Canadian regulatory procedures. Finally, the aim of the presentation is to foster a discussion on the importance of considering contextual factors in the environmental assessment of infrastructure projects, as well as to reflect on promising approaches for managing similar cases.

The Tragedy

On the night of Saturday, July 6, 2013, an unattended freight train consisting of 72 railcars started moving and entered the town of Lac-Mégantic at high speed, resulting in a derailment in the downtown area. The train was transporting crude oil, which led to a major fire and multiple explosions. The disaster claimed the lives of 47 people and caused an estimated spill of 6,000,000 liters of petroleum. More than 2,000 residents, representing approximately one third of the local population, were initially evacuated during the event.

Shortly after the accident, a railway bypass project was proposed by several citizens and institutional stakeholders to reroute hazardous material freight trains around the downtown core via a northeastern corridor. However, more than ten years after the rail tragedy, delays in the implementation of the project appear to have generated additional negative effects within the population. These effects included reduced public acceptance of the project and increased social conflict, stress and anxiety among future expropriated residents and individuals living near the railway corridor, stemming from uncertainty surrounding the situation and various associated concerns.

Research Mandate and Methodology

This context led the Regional Public Health authorities to seek a better understanding of the nature and extent of the current psychological and social impacts affecting the population of Lac-Mégantic and surrounding municipalities.

Conducted by the National Institute of Public Health of Quebec and Laval University, this research project aimed to document the psychological and social impacts associated with rail transportation ten years after the Lac-Mégantic rail disaster. The study also

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sought to establish a profile of the health status—primarily psychological and social—of the target population prior to the commissioning of the railway bypass. The specific objectives were to document perceptions regarding the living environment, safety, and technological and environmental risks, document psychological and social health of the population, and identify emerging issues affecting specific population groups.

A mixed-methods research design was implemented to develop this community profile. Quantitative data were collected through a population-based survey conducted between January and March 2024 among residents of the Le Granit Regional County Municipality and the city of Farnham serving as a comparison group. In total, 1,951 individuals completed the survey online (n = 1,837) or in paper format (n = 114), including 572 residents of Farnham. Overall, approximately 11% of households participated in the population-based survey.

Qualitative data were derived from 68 semi-structured interviews conducted between December 2023 and May 2024 with residents of the Le Granit Regional County Municipality and institutional stakeholders. Volunteer participants were recruited through the population-based survey, while institutional stakeholders were recruited through direct contact. A quota sampling strategy was used to ensure population representativeness with respect to place of residence and exposure to railway transportation.

The impact assessment of the bypass rail project

Less than one year after the tragedy, in May 2014, the Government of Quebec announced the launch of a feasibility study. Under the Government of Quebec's environmental impact assessment and review process, the City of Lac-Mégantic, acting as project proponent, submitted a project notice to the Quebec Ministry of Environment in January 2016. The Municipality also organized an open-house event in May 2016 to present three corridor options under consideration. According to an institutional stakeholder interviewed who attended the event, public participation was relatively limited, owing both to broad acceptance of the project and to the fact that the project remained at an early, still conceptual stage.

In May 2017, an initial mandate was granted to the Bureau d'audiences publiques sur l'environnement (BAPE) to conduct a public consultation on five railway redevelopment scenarios, including the status quo and an enhanced status quo option. During this consultation process, the Commission had already identified as problematic the fact that the City had not considered these two options in its feasibility study, despite support for maintaining the existing railway configuration among part of the population. The Commission therefore recommended that the public be provided with more comprehensive information regarding the advantages and disadvantages of this option in order to support informed decision-making. Among the alternatives assessed, one route alignment (Option 3) emerged as offering the greatest social, economic, and environmental benefits and received support from the three municipalities concerned—Lac-Mégantic, Frontenac, and Nantes.

A railway route that does not have unanimous support

Despite the completion of feasibility studies, the submission of the project notice, and the conduct of public consultations in Lac-Mégantic, the project only became tangible for many of the individuals interviewed in May 2018. This shift followed an official announcement by the Quebec and Federal governments committing to fully finance the project (100% funding). In June 2018, the City submitted its environmental impact assessment to the Ministry of Environment, which subsequently mandated the Bureau d'audiences publiques sur l'environnement (BAPE) for a second time in May 2019 to hold a public hearing on the railway route selected by the City of Lac-Mégantic.

This period appears to constitute an initial tipping point, during which project acceptance began to erode as the proposed alignment and its associated collateral impacts became more concrete and visible. During the BAPE hearings, it became evident that the selected railway route was not accepted in its current form by certain participants, including the municipalities of Frontenac and Nantes.

Two overlapping assessment processes

In parallel with the Quebec environmental impact assessment and review process, a Federal environmental assessment was initiated in 2019 to ensure that all federally relevant environmental components were adequately identified and considered. Geotechnical investigations required for the preparation of detailed construction plans and specifications were also conducted by Transport Canada (TC) beginning in 2019.

In September 2020, once the Government of Quebec authorization process concluded that the project was environmentally acceptable subject to specific conditions, the Federal government assumed responsibility for project implementation in partnership with the railway company Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC), which is designated to construct and own the bypass railway.

In October 2021, negotiations with property owners affected by expropriation began. In preparation for obtaining construction approval from the Canadian Transportation Agency (CTA), additional studies were commissioned by Transport Canada (TC), including a hydrogeological study conducted in the fall of 2021, which led to a report and a public consultation in 2022 (Englobe, 2022). According to several interviewees and media analysis, the findings of this study appear to represent another significant tipping point in the erosion of social acceptance of the project. The results raised concerns regarding the potential impacts of wetland destruction and excavation activities on groundwater systems.

The emergence of these new findings after the Government of Quebec project approval also appears to have contributed to undermining the perceived validity of earlier stages of the assessment process, including the two Bureau d'audiences publiques sur l'environnement (BAPE) inquiries. The Canadian Transportation Agency authorization process is still ongoing and is expected to conclude in the coming weeks. In this context, it remains difficult for some affected individuals to engage in expropriation negotiations while the project is still under regulatory review.

Citizen participation in a post-disaster context

Social acceptability is a complex and dynamic process over time, and the “Not In My Backyard” (NIMBY) attitude, as well as potential environmental risks, are not sufficient on their own to explain why individuals and groups do not accept—or no longer accept—the project in its current form. According to the interviews conducted, issues related to transparency and public participation also appear to have contributed to this dynamic.

On the one hand, interviewees reported a perceived lack of transparency in the project’s authorization and implementation processes, particularly limited access to critical information and clear explanations. Although Transport Canada (TC) maintains regular communication with municipalities and certain regional organizations, and provides a dedicated website, email address, and telephone line for the project, many questions remain unanswered for a significant number of participants. The limited access to information regarding the bypass project is also reflected in the population survey results, where only approximately 39% of residents in the Le Granit Regional County Municipality reported feeling very well or fairly well informed.

The limited translation of technical reports and expert presentations provided by Transport Canada (TC) into accessible, non-technical language appears to have created a barrier between project proponents and the public. This lack of accessible information may also facilitate the emergence of misinformation about the project and the environmental risks. In contrast, the approximately ten newsletters distributed by mail in both official languages (French on one side and English on the other) in the past few years were described as spreading overly general information. Finally, the limited presence of Transport Canada (TC) representatives in Lac-Mégantic was also noted as a concern.

On the other hand, respondents identified shortcomings in the modalities of public participation. Despite the holding of public hearings and open-house events, the spaces available for expressing views and influencing decision-making were perceived as insufficient. One explanation offered by participants is that the bypass project is a political commitment, creating the impression that decisions had already been made and that meaningful dialogue was no longer possible. The resulting inability to influence the project was experienced by some as a sense of powerlessness towards governmental authorities, while others developed a more general distrust, suggesting that even governments were constrained and that the railway company held decisive power.

To a lesser extent, language barriers were also identified as a limitation in stakeholder communication and engagement processes. This issue was notably linked to a visit by the Minister of Transport at the time, Omar Alghabra, who delivered a speech in English in a predominantly French-speaking community. This episode generated controversy and was perceived by some interviewees as a lack of sensitivity, and in certain cases even as an affront. Similarly, an open-house event organized by Transport Canada (TC) featuring English-speaking experts was also described as insensitive toward the affected population and interpreted as a lack of willingness to engage in genuine dialogue.

In conclusion

According to some interviewees, the post-disaster context of Lac-Mégantic would have required communication strategies that are more frequent, proactive, and transparent than those typically implemented for standard infrastructure projects. It was also suggested that dedicated spaces for dialogue should have been maintained within the Federal process to update and extend the consultations conducted at the Government of Quebec level in 2017 and 2019, which are now considered outdated. At present, these communication gaps have led some individuals to lose confidence in the bypass railway project, generating psychological impacts ranging from hope to despair, depending on individuals' perceptions and attitudes toward the project. Given that about half (50.3%) of the citizens of Lac-Mégantic still perceive a risk that another train accident will occur over the next 10 years, the uncertainty that currently surrounds the implementation of the project also contributed to heightened concern and anxiety among certain segments of the population.

According to our sources, the Transport Canada (TC) team is currently working to improve its communication practices going forward. However, these efforts are widely perceived as arriving too late, at a stage when the project—originally intended to foster cohesion and support the psychosocial recovery of the community—has instead become a source of conflict and division.

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