

Grade Separation Project
in
Wellington, Ohio

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Wellington, Ohio is located in the southern portion of Lorain County, about 50 minutes southwest of Cleveland. According to the 2000 Census, Wellington has 4,551 people living in 1,850 housing units. The village encompasses approximately 2.9 square miles of incorporated land and is surrounded by farmland for many miles.

Brief History

The village was settled in 1818 by five men from Massachusetts and New York. Initial growth was slow, but in 1845, the “Big Four” Railroad gave in to the demands of Wellington residents and agreed to build their line from Cleveland to Columbus through the village (Williams). After the railroad opened in 1849, growth in Wellington skyrocketed with hundreds of families moving from surrounding towns to gain access to the new railroad.

Further evidence of the railroad’s contribution to growth can be seen in the local dairy industry. In the last half of the nineteenth century, dairy production in Wellington was booming, but there was no easy way to preserve milk long enough to get it to nearby cities like Cleveland (Williams). Turning the milk into cheese was the solution and soon there were over 60 cheese factories around Wellington. Dozens of warehouses followed with factories to build cheese boxes and other tools required for cheese production. This solution was only viable because the cheese could be shipped out of town on the railroad. This “cheese boom” brought a steady stream of growth to the area and the population continued to increase. Cheese was so prevalent in Wellington that the village was named “Cheese Capitol of the World” from 1868 to 1910. This cheese heritage remains today, evident on several buildings and in the annual Wellington Cheese Festival held the third

Saturday of every July. None of this would have been possible without the railroad's presence in Wellington.

Local Road and Rail

The village is divided by two highways and two railroads. State Route 58 runs north and south through town and carries an average of 20,000 vehicles per day (Alspach, Personal Interview). State Route 18 runs east and west through town and carries an average of 17,000 vehicles per day. The Wheeling & Lake Erie Railway cuts through the southern portion of town and typically carries 15 trains per day. CSX Transportation owns the main railroad tracks that cut diagonally through town from southwest to northeast. These tracks carry an average of 80 to 90 trains per day. This busy rail line crosses four streets at grade while inside the village limits.

Traffic and Safety Issues

Over the years, as highway and rail traffic has increased, a major problem has become evident in Wellington. With an average of three to four trains per hour on the CSX rail line, traffic can back up quickly and does not always have time to clear before the arrival of another train. In particular, this problem occurs on both state routes and has a negative impact on downtown business. Although the railroad does try to help in the situation by running more trains at night, problems do still occur during the day and often lead to residents being late for work or appointments. Local residents have learned to build extra time into their schedules in case a train does cause a delay, but some see this as an unfair burden on our village.

The problems of traffic congestion downtown are significant to some individuals, but this particularly worries our local police, fire, and ambulance crews who need to respond to emergencies where seconds count. The fire chief and ambulance director each point out that this issue concerns more than just residents in the village, it concerns the surrounding townships as well because they depend upon our safety services for protection. They remind us that the village accounts for only 2.9 square miles of their 125 square mile districts, which are some of the largest in the state (Alspach, Comment Sheet).

Search for Solutions

In February 2000, Mayor Barbara O’Keefe appointed a nine member Grade Separation Committee. This committee met with representatives of the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT), the County Engineer’s liaison to the Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA), and the village’s planning consultant (Village of Wellington, Wellington Train Committee). This group was charged with finding a solution to Wellington’s traffic problems by identifying a site where a grade separation could occur.

Some residents questioned the makeup of the committee, complaining that the public was not adequately represented. The committee consisted of the mayor, two village council members, the police and fire chiefs, the ambulance director, the utility director, and two “residents” – a politically charged local priest, and a police officer (Alspach, Route 58). As the planning process would go on, more questions would be raised about this committee.

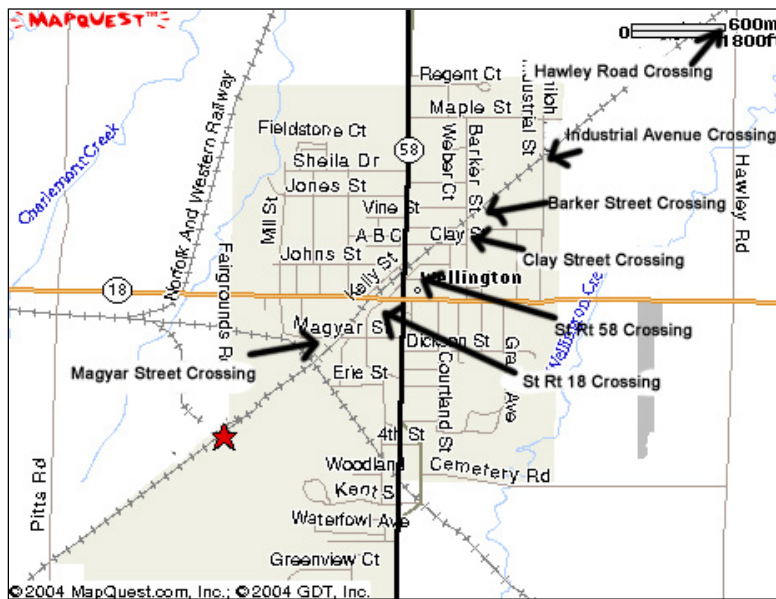
The committee analyzed five crossings within the village, one township crossing, and one additional location where a crossing could occur after constructing an already planned road. The committee had three types of solutions that they could look at for each location. They could recommend a full grade separation, where all traffic from a street would be routed over or under the railroad tracks. A single-lane grade separation would allow limited access for emergency vehicles, leaving the public stuck at the crossings. They could also recommend a bypass around the village.

The construction of a bypass around Wellington would provide only one real advantage – the rerouting of traffic around the village, thus reducing congestion. However, there were two major disadvantages to the plan. First, it is the most costly and would take the longest to construct. ODOT has clearly stated that they have no plans to pay for a bypass around Wellington at any time in the near future (Alspach, Lorain). Secondly, with traffic being routed around town, less traffic will pass local businesses and it is likely that local shops would see a loss of business. This could lead to a loss of businesses and a further increase in the number of signs advertising storefronts for rent. The Grade Separation Committee ruled out the possibility of a bypass due to a lack of funding from the state.

The idea of a single-lane grade separation got a lot of attention from the local residents. This option would provide emergency crews with access to a crossing in a location that would be convenient to them. This is also less costly to construct and would not require a major detour of traffic. In addition, this could be built anywhere along the railroad tracks because it will not serve private vehicles. Unfortunately, this option is not without its disadvantages. Since it does not provide access for all traffic, ODOT will not

contribute any financial support for its construction (Village of Wellington, Village Council). There were limited complaints about private vehicles not having access. A few residents voiced fears that this location could become a haven for undesirable activity such as drugs due to its infrequency of use and location in a secluded area. This option was also ruled out by the Grade Separation Committee for funding reasons.

Having ruled out two of the three options, the Grade Separation Committee was left with only the full grade separation to consider. This project would allow all vehicles, both private and emergency, to continue with their travels even with a train present on the tracks. Since all vehicles would have access, it would be eligible for state and federal funding assistance. If located on a state highway, ODOT will pay for 90% of the cost with CSX picking up 5% and the village being responsible for the remaining 5%. The Grade Separation Committee went on to study the feasibility of a grade separation, either an overpass or underpass, at several locations in the village. Each of these locations will be analyzed below in no particular order.



Magyar Street is in the southwest quadrant of the village. Although it is primarily residential, there is a factory near the railroad tracks and an entrance to the Lorain County Fairgrounds is at

the end of the street. The Grade Separation Committee looked only briefly at this location (Village of Wellington, Wellington Train Committee). They reported that an overpass would require the closing of Wheeling Avenue and Bennett Street as well as disrupt truck traffic at the factory near the railroad. The committee reported that an underpass was mentioned only in passing, but was not considered due to the requirement that a temporary set of tracks be built during the construction to allow trains to continue to move.

Barker Street is in the northeast quadrant of the village. It is the major north-south arterial street within the northern half of the village. Again, there is a factory near the railroad tracks, there are some businesses on the southern end, and the rest of the street is residential. The Grade Separation Committee reported that an underpass would require the movement of a high-pressure gas line (Village of Wellington, Wellington Train Committee). No further study was done for an underpass and no consideration was ever given to an overpass.

Hawley Road is just outside the village limits on the northeast corner. It is expected that the industrial park area will be expanded north and east and will connect to Hawley Road. The Grade Separation Committee considered rebuilding Hawley and Peck Wadsworth Roads as a sort of bypass around the village (Village of Wellington, Wellington Train Committee). There are few houses here to disturb. In time, this grade separation would also be accessible by a connector road into the industrial park. However, the fire chief suggested that this location is too far from a fire station and would be of no use to his crews. Following that statement, no further consideration of this location was considered.

Clay Street is also in the northeast quadrant of the village. The crossing here has been closed for decades due to several deadly accidents. There is a factory on one end and an auto repair shop, but the rest of the street is residential. An underpass was never considered because temporary tracks would need to be constructed (Village of Wellington, Wellington Train Committee). However, an overpass was discussed. Due to the rail grade being five to seven feet higher than the road, the committee felt that the street is too short to support an overpass.

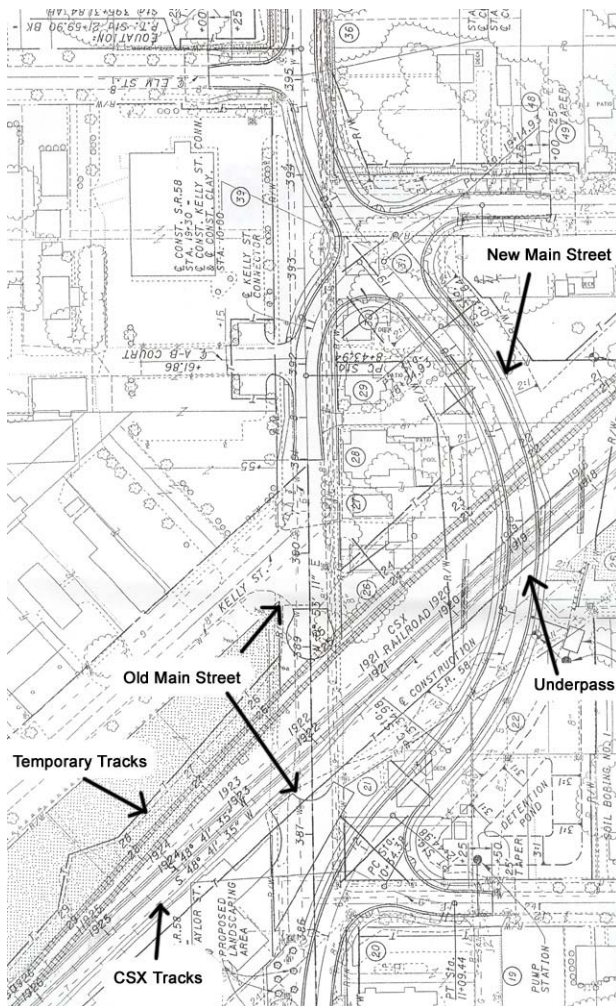
Industrial Avenue was a consideration, even though this street has not yet been built. This street is in the village's long-range plans for the industrial park in the northeast corner of the village. Although this was not considered by the Grade Separation Committee, this project would have an alternate benefit because it would provide a second way into the industrial park and would relieve congestion on Maple Street, currently the only way into the area. However, this project would require the purchase of additional private lands, which have not yet been acquired (Village of Wellington, Wellington Train Committee). In addition, the fire chief believes that this crossing would be too far away from his stations to be useful. No further consideration was given.

West Herrick Avenue is State Route 18. This crossing was considered only briefly. The Grade Separation Committee ruled that a grade separation at this crossing would produce harmful effects on downtown, surrounding businesses, and historical structures (Village of Wellington, Wellington Train Committee). No further consideration or information was collected for this location.

North Main Street was finally selected as the location of the grade separation. North Main Street is State Route 58. This major north-south route connects the majority of recent development in the village for both commercial and residential construction. An overpass here was not considered because the rail grade is seven to ten feet higher than the road surface (Village of Wellington, Wellington Train Committee). The North Main Street location has been approved by ODOT and preliminary plans have been produced and published. Final plans are being drawn up.

Official Grade Separation Plan

The preliminary plans presented by state and village officials are below. They



call for a set of temporary railroad tracks to be built north of the current tracks, stretching from just east of State Route 18 to just west of Barker Street. This will allow train traffic to continue while construction of the rail bridge over the new highway is being constructed. Once this new bridge is built, the trains will resume travel over their normal route and the temporary tracks can be removed. The new road will curve east and start on a 5% downward grade just north of Taylor

Street, moving a total of 224 feet east of the present highway location before traveling under the railroad tracks. The road then begins to curve back to the west and ascend back to street level, where it will rejoin North Main Street where it intersects Elm Street. Kelly Street will then wrap around through the present Route 58 right-of-way and connect to the new North Main Street. The areas of abandoned road will be turned into green space. After the temporary tracks are removed, any property that was taken solely for construction of the temporary tracks will be returned to its previous owner (SR 58 Railroad Grade Separation Map #2)

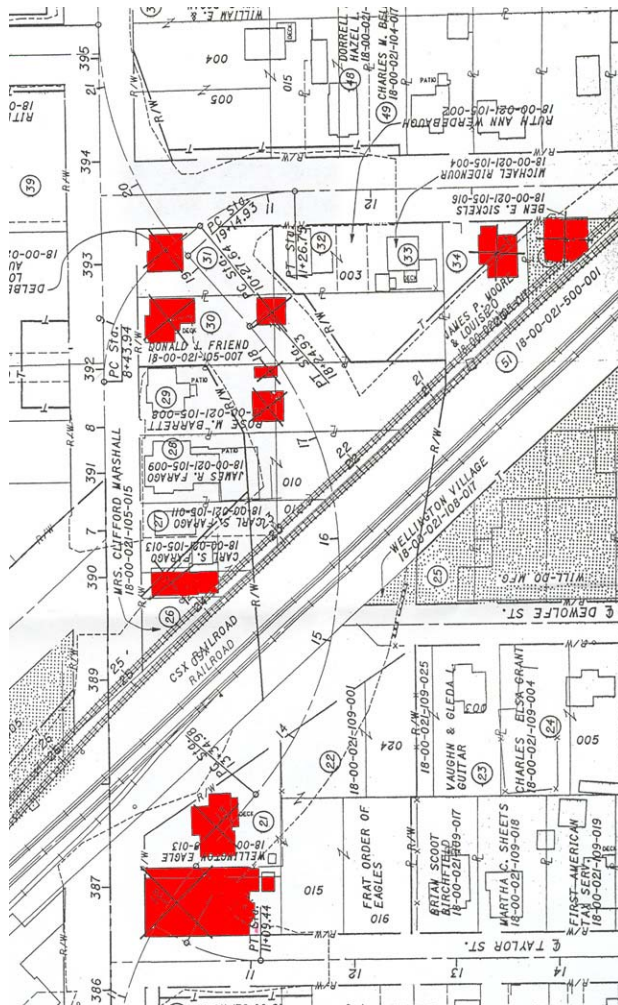
This project could be built with either cut slopes or retaining walls. Cut slopes are more aesthetically pleasing, but require more surrounding land than walls. In either case, this project would affect 16 property owners. The cost is estimated to be between \$9.1 million and \$10 million (TranSystems). The village expects its portion of the project cost to be around \$500,000.

The Village of Wellington proposes to pay for their 5% of the total project cost by using noise mitigation money that came from CSX Transportation as part of their agreement for the takeover of the rail line from Conrail Corporation. A study was done to find what homes and businesses would be most affected by the increased noise and vibration levels caused by the significant increase in train traffic under the ownership of CSX. This money was given to municipalities to use for the greater good of their communities to help reduce noise. Wellington received \$380,000 for this purpose (Alspach, Wellington Railroad Committee). Construction of a grade separation is allowable for this money because with the loss of a grade crossing, trains will no longer be required to sound their horns (Sprague). However, it is doubtful that any reduction in

noise would be found in Wellington after the construction of this grade separation. In their claim of reduced noise, village officials fail to take into account the crossings at West Herrick Avenue and Barker Street that are within 1,000 feet of North Main Street and will still require the sounding of horns.

Local Criticism of Location

The North Main Street location has drawn intense criticism from the community because of the many devastating side effects of the project. According to the preliminary plans, this project will destroy six homes and displace at least nine families (SR 58



Railroad Grade Separation Map #1). Two businesses would also be destroyed. In addition, the state will take portions of land from five additional property owners and destroy three outbuildings. Each of the structures to be demolished is shown in red on the map at left. These devastating effects would be necessary because of the construction of a temporary track to preserve train traffic throughout the project duration and because the road will be shifted to the east.

The residents affected by the project have organized into a group called the Main Street Coalition. This group has been actively campaigning against the project by attending all meetings at the village and state levels, distributing information, and writing letters to the editor of local newspapers. They have also circulated petitions to get an issue on the November ballot to prevent the village from funding their 5% portion of the cost. The residents point out that \$380,000 of the money that the village will use to fund this project is being used to take the homes from the same families that the money was intended to help. In addition, a member of this group was overwhelmingly elected to village council in November 2003.

The Ohio Department of Transportation and village officials have presented a good amount of information to local residents about what will result from the project and how the finished project will look. They have presented multiple options for the aesthetics of the finished underpass. Some of these options include the type of material to be used for any retaining walls, the materials and design of all railings along the project, and the color of the actual railroad bridge as seen from the highway (Dupee). However, not all concerns are being addressed by state officials. Ben Sickles' auto repair business on Clay Street is one of two businesses that will be lost in the project. He is told that he will get fair market value, but wants to know just how much that would cover. Sickles states:

They say I will get fair market value, but that's not true. I'll be out of business for a year and a half while they use my property. They're paying me the value of the building to tear it down. But

what happens to my business? And what about rebuilding costs at today's prices? Will they pay that?

Others agree with Sickels and want to know just how much money they will receive for their properties (Henderson, Underpass Expected).

Locally, village officials have done a poor job of informing the public how the project would be built and why it must be constructed the way it is designed. Many question why we need to build temporary tracks. The reason is that we are dealing with railroad property and we cannot interfere with their business because we want a separation. The present tracks must be removed and the roadbed underneath removed in order to build the new road. We then have to build the railroad bridge over the newly constructed highway. Local residents also question why the road must be moved 224 feet to the east. This is necessary because any attempt at an underpass at the present crossing location would require the downward slope to start at the center of town and would cut off access to Depot Street, Taylor Street, and Kelly Street (Public Involvement). This would also surely ruin the historic look of downtown Wellington.

Village officials have also failed to give adequate responses to other resident questions about the necessity of the project as a whole. For instance, residents have stated that the village should just add on to the north fire station and locate an ambulance there. The initial response to this question came from ODOT and stated, "This comment is beyond the scope of this project as it does not have involvement in looking at the emergency facilities of Wellington" (Public Involvement). Village officials later commented that they felt that staffing a second ambulance location would be too costly. They further stated that this still does not help with police matters or for school buses

trying to reach their destinations. While school buses are a concern, they are not of the same concern as police or emergency services. The Wellington Police Department always has two patrols on duty, so each could be assigned to remain on one side of the tracks. For the ambulance service, neighboring Rochester with a population of 190 has had great success with stations on both sides of the tracks (U.S. Census Bureau). Claims that an additional ambulance station would cost taxpayers \$200,000 per year seem unlikely and the director has not yet justified how those figures were determined.

Village Council Underestimates the Opposition

Village Council seems to believe that the opposition to this project is limited to a small group of individuals and families. They believe that the opposition is nothing more than NIMBY – residents saying “Not in my back yard” (Alspach, ODOT Public Meeting). However, they fail to take into account the overwhelming results of the last Village Council election where a leading opponent of the Main Street grade separation won with 10% more votes than her next closest competitor – the biggest advocate of the project (Lorain County Board of Elections). Council also fails to take into account the petition with over 300 signatures to try to block the village from paying for their portion of the project (May). The 300 signatures on this petition represent far more people than would be affected by this project, many of whom oppose the project not because it is in their back yard, but for other reasons. Some of these other reasons include the loss of property by private individuals, the change in look for our downtown area, the possible traffic problems that this could create, or the lack of information of how this project will affect surrounding property owners who are not directly impacted by the project (Henderson, ODOT Responds).

Analysis of the Proposed Project

Some of the logic used in evaluating each site seems flawed. For instance, construction of an underpass was rejected at every location except Route 58. In each case, the reason given for the rejection was that it would require the construction of temporary railroad tracks. There is no apparent reason why this requirement is acceptable at Route 58 but unacceptable at all other crossings. Meanwhile, an underpass at Barker Street would require the movement of a high-pressure gas line. The Route 58 location will require the movement of a water main, telecommunication lines, and possibly a sewer line. Again, no explanation is given for why one is acceptable and the other is not. In addition, the village should explain why there was no consideration ever given to an overpass on Barker Street.

Conclusion

For the project to continue, the Village Council will need to convince residents that this is the best solution we have available. This will be tested on November 2, 2004, when the residents of Wellington vote to decide if the village can use noise mitigation monies to pay for a grade separation at State Route 58. If Village Council passes that test, final approval will be required from ODOT. Then each affected property will need to be acquired through eminent domain procedures. After each of these steps has been completed, the project will be bid out to contractors and a contract will be awarded. Construction, if the project is approved, is expected to take 18 to 24 months.

One thing is clear; the Village of Wellington has a problem. We have many trains and many road vehicles and all have to cross together at grade. Things will only get worse. Wellington is a growing community and the number of cars and trucks traveling

these two highways will only increase. Train traffic will not get any lighter. Freight traffic in America is expected to grow by at least 60% in the next 20 years. State Departments of Transportation are pushing for most of this freight to travel by rail because our highway systems cannot handle the extra truck traffic (Trainorders.com). With state highway departments now begging railroads to carry more freight, we can be assured that our local problem with railroad crossings will only get worse.

A solution is needed in Wellington to separate the roads and the rails. For any solution to become a reality, the village must be honest with residents and be more open to other locations for a grade separation. Likewise, the residents of Wellington need to step back and analyze the situation with an unbiased mind to find what solution will work best and benefit the entire community.

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