



Guide Dog Users of Canada Utilisateurs de chiens-guides du Canada

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Registered Charity #869175190RR0001

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The Toronto Star
City Section
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David O'Brien, President
Toronto Hydro Corporation
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RE: "Child shocked by metal ground plate: Toronto Hydro " (Toronto Star, Jan 30, 2009)

I am writing on behalf of Guide Dog Users of Canada/Utilisateurs de chiens-guides du Canada, a consumer organization representing blind and partially sighted handlers of guide dogs, in response to the article which appeared on January 30, 2009 in *The Toronto Star* regarding a child having received an electric shock from a metallic sidewalk ground plate. In particular, we would like to express our concern with President and CEO David O'Brien's recommendation that those concerned with the potential safety hazard posed by the ground plates simply avoid stepping on them if they see them.

For the majority of guide dog handlers, "seeing" these plates is simply not an option, and thus avoiding them even less so. We are aware that there have been ongoing reports of pets having receiving electric shocks from these plates, and it is our understanding that Toronto Hydro has already launched a widespread operation to replace the covers with non-conductive fiberglass (e.g. the January 24, 2009 article by Don Peat in the Toronto Sun, attached). However, we would like to draw the attention of Mr. O'Brien (and the general public) to the fact that for a blind guide dog handler, avoiding these risks may not be possible. Furthermore, the work of a guide dog can be significantly impaired (if not ended) from the experience of an electric shock, as they may become fearful of walking on sidewalks or near such plates.

Similar problems sometimes arise with surface-level light rail tracks. For example, in 2003 (and again in 2008), the light rail tracks in Portland, OR were reported to be shocking numerous guide dogs as they crossed over, due to errant voltage leaking onto the tracks. While the shock might not be lethal, the psychological effects can be traumatizing and, quite possibly, lead to the early retirement of what, by many accounts, is a \$30,000 to \$50,000 dog. (See attachments.)

We applaud Toronto Hydro's efforts to resolve the problem, but would like to point out that not everyone is able to avoid this hazard as simply as is implied in the original article. These metal plates may pose a significant hazard to guide dogs and guide dog handlers, even if they are in the process of being replaced.

Sincerely,
Anthony Tibbs
Vice-President, GDUC

4 attachments: Toronto Sun 01/24/09, Toronto Star 01/30/09, Oregonian 07/23/03, 04/10/08

Attachment 1: Toronto Sun Article, 01/24/09

Hydro unleashes \$6M for dog safety

Dangerous metal sidewalk plates to be replaced by fibreglass

By DON PEAT, SUN MEDIA

Last Updated: 24th January 2009, 5:35am

<http://www.torontosun.com/news/torontoandgta/2009/01/24/8132026-sun.html>

Dogged by repeated reports of pet zappings across the city, Toronto Hydro will spend \$6 million to pull out its metal sidewalk plates.

Hydro spokesman Karen Evans told the Sun yesterday the utility will be changing all its 15,000 steel handwells to ones made from a fibreglass resin.

The change to a non-conductive material would be part of the \$10 million hydro has dedicated to tackling stray voltage in the wake of two dog electrocutions in the last two months and several other incidents in which the dogs were shocked but otherwise uninjured.

"The incidents that happened have reinforced that for us," Evans said.

"It's time to look at handwells and a reasonable alternative."

The current handwells, which include a steel plate on the sidewalk and a box that goes underground, were installed about 50 years ago.

Steel handwells seem to have been behind at least one of the dog electrocutions.

Mrak the Labradoodle stepped on a metal plate at the base of a lamppost and died last week in the city's west end.

Two dogs were zapped after walking on a metal plate in Yorkville on Wednesday and a dog was zapped after walking over a metal plate on Canniff St. Thursday. All three of those dogs are expected to survive.

Last November, a German shepherd named Pierre died in the west-end when he walked on an electrified sidewalk.

Ian McConachie of the Toronto Humane Society was pleased Toronto Hydro is taking action.

"We would hope that they move as quickly as possible to replace all equipment that would put animals at risk," McConachie said.

He reminded owners to take their pets to the vet if they think they were shocked.

"The animal may seem fine, but heart and respiratory conditions can arise as much as 36 hours after the initial electric shock," McConachie said.

"They should contact Toronto Hydro to repair the problem to ensure that other animals are not put at risk."

Attachment 2: Toronto Star Article, 01/30/09

Child shocked by metal ground plate: Toronto Hydro

Jan 30, 2009 06:00 PM

<http://www.thestar.com/News/GTA/article/580033>

THE CANADIAN PRESS

Toronto Hydro says it has learned that a child received a minor shock from a metal ground plate under similar circumstances that resulted in the deaths of two dogs.

The utility says 600 employees will work around the clock, seven days a week, to fix the stray voltage problem.

Workers are performing mobile detection sweeps and will ensure that older equipment is inspected and repaired first.

President and CEO David O'Brien says Toronto Hydro is reinforcing wiring inside the metal ground plates by encasing it in rubber and plastic and creating a water-tight barrier.

Two dogs died in recent months after stepping on such plates and getting shocked, but officials now say they have an unconfirmed report of an incident involving a child.

For people concerned about the potential hazard while the utility is in the process of repairs, O'Brien says: "If you see them, don't step on them."

Attachment 3: The Oregonian Article, 2003

TriMet will insulate tracks to protect dogs from shock

07/23/03; JOHN SNELL - John Snell: 503-294-5949; johnsnell at news.oregonian.com

BEAVERTON -- TriMet officials aren't sure why guide dogs are receiving electric shocks on westside light-rail tracks. But they are zeroing in on a temporary solution: insulating tracks at 10 passenger stations where dogs are most likely to be zapped.

Terry Dolan, TriMet's manager of rail transportation for MAX, wasn't sure what the insulation would cost.

"At this point, it's irrelevant," he said. "We'll just pay for it."

The level of electricity going through the tracks isn't great, but tests have shown it to be as much as 35 volts, or about three times the voltage of a car battery.

For the past three years, dogs have occasionally received mild shocks when crossing the MAX tracks west of the Elmonica/Southwest 170th Avenue Station. It usually happens after a rain, when they step on the tracks with wet paws.

The number of dogs that has been shocked is small, but the effects have been profound. One dog was so badly startled it had to be retired; two had to be retrained.

Guide dog advocates estimate that training a dog can be a \$50,000 investment.

Dolan said TriMet maintenance crews recently tested track insulation.

"Results of the test were positive," he wrote in a memo. "I wetted one hand, placed it on the running rail and felt nothing."

Dolan said Tuesday that TriMet and Portland General Electric haven't figured out the source of the electricity. Crews have considered a range of possibilities, including a

suggestion that it is linked to steel rebar -- a reinforcing material embedded in concrete -- deep beneath the tracks. TriMet plans another round of tests next month before the insulating material is installed, Dolan said.

He said it would be added at the 10 train stations west of Elmonica, including the Hatfield Government Station at the end of the line in Hillsboro.

"I am very pleased with the progress they are making," said Patricia Kepler, president of Guide Dog Users of Oregon. She has pressed for a solution since the problem was discovered three years ago.

"Initially, I felt they didn't care," she said Tuesday. "Maybe we didn't get through to the right people. But now I see that they definitely do care and are trying to address the problem."

Dolan said the insulating material would be placed only on sections of track at transit stations. Dogs would not be as likely to encounter light-rail track in other areas. "We typically have two pedestrian crossings at each station," he said. The crossings are 14 feet wide.

Dolan said insulating material also would be added to the train's bridge plate -- a metal slab that goes from the door of trains and extends to the station platform.

He said there were reports of dogs receiving shocks when they had one paw on the bridge plate and another on metal in the platform.

Even after the insulation is installed, TriMet plans to keep working with PGE to find the source of the voltage. However, crews have been trying to find the source of the electricity since 2000.

Attachment 4: The Oregonian Article, 2008

TriMet eases guide dog shock problems

MAX - The agency puts capacitor boxes on the east and checks the west frequently

Thursday, April 10, 2008

JOHN SNELL - The Oregonian Staff - John Snell: 503-294-5949; johnsnell at news.oregonian.com

The problem of guide dogs receiving electric shocks on light rail tracks has spread to the east side, TriMet officials say.

Guide dogs for the blind have occasionally been shocked when stepping on MAX tracks since 2000.

TriMet was never able to determine why but figured the problem was limited to west-side tracks and only after it rained.

That belief was abandoned in February, when three dogs in training received minor shocks at two stations in Gresham.

Teaching a dog to work as a guide costs about \$50,000 per animal, said Patricia Kepler, past president of Guide Dog Users of Oregon.

Three years ago, TriMet installed capacitors near three west-side train platforms to absorb errant electricity that was shocking the dogs.

But on Jan. 29 it discovered that the problem was back, at least at the Elmonica/Southwest 170th Avenue MAX station, said Mary Fetsch, spokeswoman for the transportation agency.

A few days later, TriMet was told by Kepler that her dog, a 5-year-old German shepherd named Reuben, also was shocked at the Elmonica MAX Station.

TriMet changed the capacitors and decided to check them weekly, rather than monthly, to make sure they're still working.

About the same time, TriMet was told of problems at the Cleveland Avenue Station in Gresham.

"It's not the kind of shock that would cause physical damage," said Brad Hibbard, director of training at the Boring-based Guide Dogs for the Blind. "This is similar to having a really big shock of static electricity."

Hibbard said three dogs in training were shocked when they were taken to Gresham by their trainers to ride light rail.

Capacitor boxes went in last month at the Gresham Central Transit Station at Northeast Eighth Street and Kelly Avenue and the Cleveland Avenue Station at Northeast Eighth Street and Cleveland Avenue.

TriMet Systems Engineer Kai Looijenga said they were installed as a precaution.

Hibbard said none of the dogs shocked while training on the east side have shown lasting effects. No dog that's being used by a blind person has been shocked on the east side, he added.