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## Pickering councillors question safety of York-Durham sewer construction project



**Accident.** Police, fire and ambulance were all on scene at a Strabag construction site on the York-Durham Townline, where a worker was trapped in a tunnel just after 3:30 p.m. on Jan. 30. According to reports he was still conscious after the accident. *Ryan Pfeiffer/Metroland Moya Dillon*

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PICKERING -- Councillors are questioning the safety of the York-Durham trunk sewer expansion after an explosion last week injured four men.

The April 10 explosion, which occurred about 150 feet underground in one of the shafts being bored for the project, prompted Pickering councillors Bill McLean and Peter Rodrigues to raise concerns at a Durham Region works committee meeting the following day, asking whether methane gas released by the tunnelling operation could potentially create problems for residents.

"I wanted to know if methane could travel laterally into people's homes," said Coun. McLean, noting the gas is prevalent among the shale bed the project is tunnelling through, although it is generally harmless when released into the open atmosphere.

"When it's contained that's when the danger is, but I'd like some more information about it."

Coun. Rodrigues also expressed dismay at a lack of communication about the project from York Region to both Durham and the City.

"My concern is that there's just not enough information coming through on this," he said. "There needs to be better, more frequent communication between all the parties involved."

Works staff was asked to look into the methane issue and report back.

An investigation into the explosion by the Ministry of Labour is ongoing, and on April 12 a stop-work order was issued to contractor Strabag Inc.

"No further tunnelling operations on the project should be undertaken until that order is withdrawn," said William Lin, a spokesman for the ministry.

As part of that order, Strabag will be required to provide a written assessment of the hazards of the tunnelling operation as it's being carried out and provide additional training to workers before resuming the project.

Patrick Casey, director of corporate communications for York Region, said it's too early to tell how the stop-work order will affect the overall project.

"Our contractor is continuing to work with the ministry," he said of Strabag. "Once we can lift that stop-work order, work will continue and at that time we will be able to reassess any timelines. Everyone would like to learn what happened in order to have a better understanding of the incident."

Of the four men injured, one remains in hospital undergoing treatment for burns. The remaining three were released within two days of the explosion.

Mr. Lin said the cause of the explosion is still unknown and the investigation is ongoing.

When questioned about reports from a worker on site that a pocket of methane gas ignited and caused the blast, Mr. Casey said that information "seems to be correct."

The ministry conducted a previous investigation at a Strabag sewer construction site when a man working at a site at 30050 Markham-Durham Townline was injured after being struck by a haulage vehicle while working in one of the tunnels on Jan. 30.

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