

How Railroads Collaborate with Stakeholders to Reduce Grade Crossing Impacts

America's private freight railroads operate the world's safest, most efficient freight rail network and have evolved for nearly 200 years to meet the changing needs of freight shippers, the economy and the nation. Over that time, our country's population has increased, freight traffic has grown, motor vehicle usage has accelerated and extensive street and roadway networks have been developed and expanded around busy railroad corridors.

A rail line once located on the outskirts of a small town with minimal public interaction may today bisect a bustling suburb, where citizens frequently cross that line as part of their daily travels. As rail and vehicle traffic continues to grow, the railroad industry remains committed to safely and efficiently serving customers while minimizing the impact of operations on surrounding communities, including at busy grade crossings where roads intersect with railroad tracks.

With more than 200,000 such grade crossings across the country, railroads work closely with community leaders, government partners, first responders, the public and their own operational teams to manage and mitigate the impact of rail crossings on communities.

Railroads regularly review and improve operating procedures to minimize occupying crossings.

Where possible, railroads plan train schedules, inbound and outbound yard movements and crew work schedules to minimize the time a train occupies a grade crossing. They may also modify railcar-switching practices and operations such as stopping a train clear of a crossing to conduct legally required mechanical inspections.

Currently, the industry is working with the federal government to develop other solutions, including trying to reduce the standing time for some federally required train inspections by 10 to 30 minutes or more.

America's freight railroads invest an average of \$25 billion annually to maintain and modernize the nation's nearly 140,000-mile rail network. These investments include projects to extend existing passing sidings or construct new sidings that can reduce or eliminate crossing delays.

Key Takeaway

Each railroad crossing is different. Railroads work closely with their own operational teams, community leaders, government partners, first responders and the public to manage and mitigate grade crossing impacts on communities. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to managing crossings.

Why do Trains Occupy Crossings?

Railroads occupy crossings in the normal course of business as trains move between terminals. While railroads manage operations to minimize the time trains occupy crossings, delays may occur for a variety of reasons, including:

- Unplanned events such as weather-related track blockages, signaling malfunctions, equipment failures, or unexpected crew change delays on the rail network.
- Switching (moving rail cars between tracks, adding or removing cars from a train, or moving rail cars into and out of a customer's facility), which must occur for a customer to receive traffic.
- Trains slowing to enter or depart yards near crossings.
- Trains operating under reduced speed restrictions such as during track maintenance or slowing in approach to a moveable bridge open for water traffic.
- Vandalism of rail signals or tracks; the presence of trespassers on rail tracks; or emergency response activity near the tracks that requires trains to stop.
- Trains held due to passenger or freight rail traffic ahead.
- Trains held for re-crewing to comply with federal Hours of Service regulations.

Railroads work with government partners to reduce or improve crossings.

One of the most effective ways to prevent crossing impacts is to reduce the number of crossings along the rail network. Railroads work with the local road authority, private property owners and the U.S. Department of Transportation to identify crossings that can be consolidated, upgraded or closed. Railroads work with communities to identify a variety of federal grant programs or funding streams allocated to the states such as the Section 130 program. Railroads also partner with local and state governments to improve alternate access for roadway users, such as new grade separations.

As business and residential development continues to grow, railroads work with local planning authorities to help carefully plan new infrastructure developments to limit community interaction with railroad activities, while allowing the continued operation of the railroad corridor itself.

Railroads collaborate with communities to communicate about and manage crossing impacts.

Nothing is more important to railroads than the safety of their employees and the communities where they operate. By listening to the feedback from communities — and working directly with first responders — railroads can better identify problem areas and determine how best to manage them.

- **Phone Numbers at Every Crossing:** Every crossing has a 24/7 emergency phone number and an identification number so callers can immediately communicate issues with the railroad. Using this caller information, railroads coordinate with communities to identify workable short- and long-term solutions to mitigate crossing impacts. Some railroads also provide real-time information about a current occupied crossing and an estimated time for when it may be resolved.
- **Advanced Warning Technology:** The freight rail industry embraces technology that enhances safety and efficiency. Railroads are partnering with technology companies to develop digital signs that let the public know when a train is occupying a crossing so they can choose another route in advance. “Estimated Wait Time” signs are already in use in some areas and that information also helps emergency response dispatchers direct resources around the occupied crossing.
- **Operation Lifesaver:** The freight rail industry wants to reduce blocked crossings caused by trespassers on the tracks or car/train collisions. The railroads have partnered with the non-profit organization Operation Lifesaver to sponsor programs in more than 40 states to educate communities about safety around rail-highway grade crossings. Operation Lifesaver works with the U.S. Department of Transportation each year to raise awareness, including during Rail Safety Week.

Reducing Motorist Delays in Chicago



As part of the multi-billion dollar Chicago Region Environmental & Transportation Efficiency (CREATE) program, railroads are working with public partners to separate grade crossings in the nation's busiest rail corridor.



Example Emergency Notification System (ENS)



Operation Lifesaver and AAR awareness campaign