

Public Safety, Transportation, and Rail

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Our very existence as a functioning society depends upon safely and efficiently moving people and goods. Rail is an indispensable and safe way to do that, most of the time. Unfortunately, when something goes wrong in rail transportation, it usually makes the news in a dramatic way, unlike highway accidents which are so commonplace that they are often little noticed by the media. There is no form of transportation that is immune to mishap; neither trucks, buses, planes, barge towboats, ships or pipelines.

Railroads are safe only to the extent that everyone does what they are supposed to do, and that includes the public as well as rail employees. Railroads themselves are often victims. The recent tragedy in Midland Texas is an example. Nobody wants to be involved in such a needless accident, certainly not the railroad. It appears that the loss of lives in Midland was entirely preventable had the driver of the flatbed truck, on which veterans and their spouses were riding, stopped when the crossing signal system began to sound the alarm, warning of an approaching train. There is nothing that we can think of in the way of manmade objects traversing the earth's surface that can quite equal the energy of a ten-to-twenty-thousand-ton freight train at 60 mph. The fact that such trains regularly passed through Midland must have been known to everyone in town, including the organizers of the parade. Had someone bothered to contact the Union Pacific and inform the railroad of the planned parade, arrangements could have been made to alert train crews. We are confident that the standard signal "cross arm" -- as well as all other such public rail-highway crossings in the country -- had a telephone number and specific location identity displayed for all to see. How many people in the general public are aware of this? Moreover, it appears that the town people, not wanting to be disturbed by locomotive whistle blowing, had requested "quiet zone" status, in which such train whistles were not permitted. All that said, the railroad, or any railroad, has responsibilities too, including adjusting the actuation point for signals and gates commensurate with changes in authorized train speeds. Understandably motorists hate to wait unnecessarily long intervals of time for trains to show up after the first alarm sounds, yet they don't want to be, and should not be, surprised by a short warning either.

Aside from the self-inflicted loss of life resulting from people placing themselves at risk by illegally walking on tracks, the most dangerous thing in railroading today is the highway-rail crossing. Ask any locomotive engineer about the commonplace practice of motorists running around crossing gates. North Carolina authorities even have a video of a school bus crossing in front of on-coming trains. Over the course of the past decade, or more, Amtrak has lost crew members and passengers in accidents caused by big trucks ramming trains at grade crossing, and even a barge towboat striking a railroad bridge.

Public safety officials, as well as the railroads themselves, have more work to do in education. But personal ignorance and inattention is tough to combat, and it has gotten worse with texting, tweeting, and preoccupation with social media. Maybe we can take advantage of social media to combat the problem? It's worth a try! # # # #