

## **Breakout 14: Highway-Rail Grade Crossings**

*Moderator:* Darin Kosmak, Texas Department of Transportation

### Session Summary:

Highway-rail grade crossings present a unique safety concern for both the railroads and public planning entities. Safety efforts over the past 25 years have drastically reduced the number of collisions and fatalities resulting from train-vehicle collisions, but it is widely believed that more education, enforcement, and engineering can be done to reduce the levels even more. In addition to the safety concerns at highway-rail grade crossings, communities are also affected by the requirement of trains to blow loud horns as a warning of their approach to crossings and the delays resulting from trains blocking crossings for an extended length of time.

Ron Ries, Staff Director, Federal Railroad Administration discussed the “Quiet Zones” issue. The Final Rule on the Use of Locomotive Horns at Highway-Rail Grade Crossings was the first federal law requiring locomotives to blow their horn at all highway-rail grade crossings. Prior to that point, most states had some sort of requirement. Part of the Final Rule is the ability for communities to implement Quiet Zones where, with the use of safety enhancements at each crossing, the train can pass through a corridor without blowing the train horn. Texas has 21 new Quiet Zones and over 150 Notices of Intent since the final rule was implemented. Data show that a similarly gated highway grade crossing without train horn-blowing increases the possibilities of a collision by over 66 percent, so in order to implement a Quiet Zone the risk along the corridor must be evaluated. With the installation of safety devices or treatments at each crossing, if they are warranted, the risk must either be below the national average risk of a gated crossing with a train horn or the risk of that particular crossing with a train horn.

Jack C. Hanagriff, Houston Police Department FRA Law Enforcement Liaison, made a presentation on “Reducing Blocked Crossings and Improving Safety.” The City of Houston has implemented a *Trainwatch* program designed to reduce the instances of blocked crossings and improve safety at highway-rail grade crossings in the Houston area. Working with the Houston Police Department, the City of Houston has installed cameras at several significant crossings around the city and established a procedure for the public to report train activities such as stopped trains at a crossing for an extended period. As a result, the railroads have altered operating practices to reduce the instances of blocked crossings and the Police Department has improved safety at several crossings by focusing on improper driver behavior identified on videos at the crossings.

In light of recent national-level studies indicating that train activity in Texas is expected to increase dramatically over the next several decades, TTI’s Curtis Morgan (Multimodal Freight Transportation Program) discussed “Law Enforcement and Judiciary Education Projects. Areas in the state with little rail traffic may begin experiencing notable increases and areas with current high levels of train activity will begin experiencing significant impacts related to that activity. There is a continuing need to address

highway-rail grade crossing safety. The specific project addressed in the presentation provided educational materials to law enforcement agencies and judicial entities along major rail routes in rural parts of Texas, most notably short educational videos created by *Operation Lifesaver*. A survey conducted after review of the educational materials by the target audience determined that the materials were useful to the understanding of the issues and laws pertaining to grade crossing and trespassing on rail property.

In his closing remarks, the session moderator Darin Kosmak discussed several efforts by TxDOT to distribute educational material to law enforcement agencies around the state and to improve safety at highway-rail grade crossings.