


NorthJersey.com

 PRINT THIS

 Click to Print

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

A push for gates at rail crossings

Monday, October 13, 2008

Last updated: Monday October 13, 2008, 5:40 AM

BY ELAINE D'AURIZIO

NorthJersey.com

STAFF WRITER

For four years, the mayor of Riverdale tried to get gates at the railroad crossing on busy Hamburg Turnpike.

"You have a railroad crossing at a bump in the road and there's not much visibility," William Budesheim said. "It's a matter of common sense."

Until Jan. 15, he got nowhere.

At 8:15 p.m. that day, a 71-car freight train smashed into a 1994 Pontiac at the crossing, critically injuring the 18-year-old driver.

The accident focused the attention of the state Department of Transportation, which last month gave the crossing "high priority" status to upgrade safety features. In the works for early next year: gates.

The upgrade, which will cost an estimated \$10,000, will make the Hamburg Turnpike crossing one of 489 of 1,629 public railroad crossings in New Jersey with automatic gates.

One deciding factor for DOT officials was traffic volume — 16,000 vehicles each day pass over the Hamburg Turnpike crossing tracks in Riverdale.

"The main things we look at are traffic volume, if there have been accidents there, and visibility or safe distance from anything that blocks the motorist's view — such as woods, buildings, dense shrubbery — and number of train trips in the area," said Tim Greeley, a DOT spokesman.

With suburban sprawl and the proliferation of multi-unit housing, traffic and the population have grown. In 1990, Passaic and Morris counties, which generate most of the traffic on that part of Hamburg Turnpike, had a combined population of 874,413; 2007 estimates from the Census Bureau put that number at 980,590, a 12 percent increase.

Many crossings are located on once-rural streets that have turned into heavily traveled arteries now surrounded by housing.

"The railroad was built in 1881, before we had cars," said Melanie Boyer, spokeswoman

for the New York Susquehanna & Western Railway Corp. "The population has increased around the railroads resulting in more traffic. Train traffic was low too."

So are more gates needed?

Said the DOT's Greeley: "There were 10 accidents at grade crossings in New Jersey between January 2008 and August 2008 and three of them were at crossings equipped with automatic crossing gates."

On the other hand, "roughly 50 percent of the grade crossing collisions in the country occur at crossings with lights and gates," said Steve Kulm, a spokesman for the Federal Railroad Administration.

There are, of course, factors at play other than gates, including the volume of traffic at the crossing.

For example, no accidents have occurred in at least 38 years at Kinnelon's one railroad crossing, which has gates, on North Road, at the entrance to the Smoke Rise gated community.

"The road curves but it's low-volume traffic," said Mayor Glenn Sisco.

Still, Sisco thinks gates are "a good device to have."

"Sometimes you don't really see the flashing lights, especially if you're in a strange place." Sisco said. "The gates eliminate a lot of second-guessing. When they're down, you've got to stop."

Bloomington Mayor William Steenstra, whose town has two crossings (one with gates and one without), applauds Budesheim's battle for gates at Hamburg Turnpike in neighboring Riverdale.

"You come in there at night and, all of sudden you see two lights blinking and hear a bell, it's dangerous," he said. "Hopefully, they'll get moving on it."

Budesheim is asking for gates at three of the four crossings in Riverdale that lack them. He says overgrown brush, which the railroad is responsible for maintaining, obscures lights. He also points to malfunctioning lights.

"They go on and don't go off," he said. "We have to get police to let people across."

In Pompton Lakes, another town neighboring Riverdale, Mayor Katie Cole wants to see gates at all railroad crossings. Just one of the five crossings in town have them. Cole is especially concerned about the ungated crossing on Pierson Miller Drive.

"You don't get a clear view approaching the tracks because homes block the view and the approach is fast from down a hill," she said. "Lights are sometimes not enough."

In neighboring Oakland, the crossing on West Oakland Avenue also is on the DOT's list for safety gates in 2009. It has above-average traffic, visibility is restricted and motorists have difficulty seeing the lights at the crossing.

Gates, though, don't solve all problems.

"When gates are installed and working, we're finding driver impatience is the chief cause of collisions caused by people who want to get to the other side and don't want to wait for the train," said Kulm of the Federal Railroad Administration. "Ask any engineer. They see cars cut in front of them."

People gamble at railroad crossings and try to beat the train, which appears far away and moving slowly.

"But it's an optical illusion because it's a very large object in the horizon and it's difficult for the human eye to anticipate how far away it is and how fast it's moving," said Kulm.


Kulm said trespassers are the most frequent victims on the tracks — with or without gates — and educating the public is key. Several years ago, for example, a man was killed in Pompton Lakes by a train as he walked along the tracks with his earphones on.

"More and more locomotives are being equipped with video cameras that are actually capturing these vehicle-train collisions on tape," Kulm said "This agency is looking at those tapes to see if there is something engineering-wise that can be done. Some vehicles are stopping a little too close. Maybe we can move the stop sign a little farther back."

E-mail: [daurizio@northjersey.com](mailto:daurizio@northjersey.com)

**Find this article at:**

[http://www.northjersey.com/news/transportation/A\\_push\\_for\\_gates\\_at\\_rail\\_crossings.html](http://www.northjersey.com/news/transportation/A_push_for_gates_at_rail_crossings.html)

 [Click to Print](#)

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright © North Jersey Media Group