Task Force Issues Guidelines for Closing Rail Crossings

OKLAHOMA CITY — Railroad crossings where major accidents have occurred and those with high accident potential because they are difficult for motorists to see should be considered for closure, a task force investigating railroad crossing safety recommends.

The recommendations don’t cite any specific crossings. They are only guidelines for helping evaluate crossings being considered for closure, Jerry Matheson, Oklahoma Corporation Commission transportation director, said.

The task force study was ordered by state House and Senate resolutions. It was coordinated by the Corporation Commission, which regulates the opening, upgrading and closing of railroad crossings. The 14-member task force comprised representatives of federal, state, county and city government agencies, the railroad industry, motor vehicle and highway user groups and the general public.

The accident risk factors are among 12 conditions the task force said should be considered when evaluating a crossing for closure.

The task force recognizes that most crossings over busy traffic routes can’t be closed, but it generally supports a federal government goal of closing 25 percent of the nation’s 280,000 railroad crossings to reduce accidents at low-use crossings, Matheson said.

The Federal Railroad Administration’s close-and-consolidate plan seeks to close low-use crossings, build access roads to alternate crossings and upgrade the safety equipment at those crossings.

In its final report to the legislature, the task force said that a crossing should be considered for closure when two or more train/motor vehicle collisions that resulted in death, serious injury or extensive property damage have occurred during the past five years, or when a pattern of "near miss" incidents has been identified.

Closure also should be considered if motorists can’t see the crossing or an approaching train in time to prevent a collision. Corporation Commission rules require a clear roadway view of a railroad crossing from at least 50 feet away and track visibility of at least 250 feet in each direction from the crossing.

The sight distance factor is critical at passive crossings, which have no mechanical signal devices to warn motorists of approaching trains, the task force report said. If the crossing can’t be closed and if there is no funding available for a safety system upgrade, then stop signs, "rumble strips" in pavement and reflective crossbuck posts should be considered as aids to motorist safety at passive crossings, the report said.

The task force report said primary consideration also should be given to the number and speed of trains, the number of motor vehicles using the crossing, whether the crossing is needed for emergency vehicles and the distance to an alternate crossing.

Secondary considerations are the number of tracks at the crossing, the angle of the roadway and track intersection, elevation of the rail crossing in relation to the roadway, the type of warning device at the crossing, proposed property development near the crossing and the use of the crossing by pedestrians, especially near parks, schools and other public places, the report said.
The report also emphasized that crossings used by large vehicles, such as fire trucks and school buses, should have at least 200 feet of "safe" space between the railroad crossing and the nearest roadway intersection.

The task force also recommends long-term studies to gather more precise information on railroad crossing traffic patterns and conditions, more cooperation among city, county, state and federal government agencies on railroad crossing matters and more information programs to increase public awareness of railroad crossing dangers to motorists.

Matheson said the task force’s recommendations are intended to aid Oklahoma’s railroad crossing safety improvement program that has reduced train/motor vehicle collisions from 293 in 1976 to a low of 80 in 1996. There were 104 train/motor vehicle crossing accidents in 1997.

During this 21-year period, about $79.9 million has been spent to install 683 flashing-light signals and 492 crossing gate arms, upgrade 325 mechanical safety systems, install 428 crossing surfaces and close 53 crossings, Oklahoma Transportation Department statistics indicate.

Of Oklahoma’s 4,681 railroad crossings, 1,936 (41.36 percent) are equipped with mechanical warning and safety devices and 2,745 (58.64 percent) are marked only with crossbucks that identify crossing locations.

Crossing safety systems are upgraded as funds become available, Matheson said. At present, Oklahoma receives $3.2 million annually in federal funds. The federal funds pay up to 90 percent of the cost of most railroad crossing safety upgrades.

The funds are administered by the state Transportation Department’s Office of Rail Programs, subject to approval by the Corporation Commission.

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