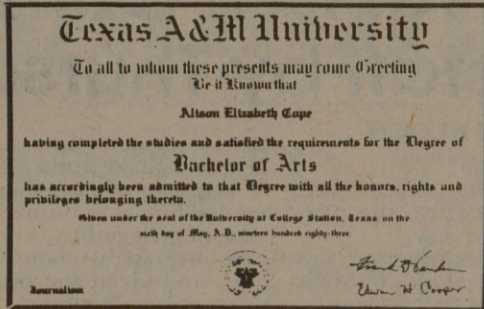


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Trains dangerous at any speed

By MICHAEL CRAWFORD
Staff Writer

The September deaths of two Texas A&M students at the Luther Street railroad intersection tragically illustrated the destructive power of a train. An average freight train traveling at 60 mph needs more than a mile and a half to stop — the equivalent of 18 football fields.

In Texas, in 1982, 89 people died and 338 people were injured as a result of collisions between trains and vehicles. Representatives of Southern Pacific Transportation Co., which owns the track through College Station and Bryan, said public awareness is the key to preventing more deaths.

"The only way I know we can get this problem whipped is through public education," said Ken Williams, media coordinator for Southern Pacific's Operation Lifesaver.

Operation Lifesaver is an educational program sponsored by a coalition of railroad companies and has been operating in Texas since 1977. Its goal is to reduce crossing accidents by alerting the community to the laws and dangers of railroad crossings.

A crossbuck (X-shaped warning sign) is, by law, the same as a yield sign," Williams said. "Nobody in their right mind would go busting through a yield sign without looking to see if an 18-wheeler was coming ... Yet people will never look at railroad crossings (and) the average freight train is 4,000 times larger than the average car."

Nationally, in 1982, 471 deaths occurred in collisions where the vehicle was moving across the track, while 55 deaths occurred while the vehicle was stalled or stopped on the tracks.

Yet, in an informal survey at the Jersey Street intersection, between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m., 25 cars stopped on the tracks while waiting at the traffic light — most had multiple occupants.

Because of the low probability of a person being at a railroad crossing at the same time a train is coming, many people become overconfident and do not look before crossing the tracks, said Rodney Stutes, employee coordinator for Operation Lifesaver.

Williams and Stutes are former locomotive engineers who have both been involved in train-vehicle collisions.

"We have both been involved in accidents where people have died," Williams said. "We have seen some horrible things and they happen quickly (and in a) matter of seconds and you have a catastrophe on your hands."

Stutes said almost half of all collisions occurred at crossings protected with lights, bells and gates or lights and bells. Excessive train speed is not a significant factor in collisions, Stutes said.

Before the deaths of the two Texas A&M students, the train speed limit through most of College Station was 60 mph. That limit was reduced to 30 mph in a Nov. 8 meeting of the College Station City Council, despite the objections of Southern Pacific.

The new limit covers virtually all of the tracks within College Station and puts into law what was a voluntary speed limit of 30 mph. All railroad companies have observed this speed limit since Oct. 19.

"This isn't going to solve anything by slowing the trains down," Stutes said. "Beating the train has very little to do with that." "Why didn't the council foresee the problems years ago and do something about West Luther Street then?"

College Station City Attorney Catherine Locke felt the lower speed limit for trains was necessary.

"In my opinion, slowing down isn't going to hurt them (the railroads) financially," Locke said. "Now they may think otherwise or have some data which indicates otherwise, but they have to slow down in Bryan anyway."

The present condition of the rails in Bryan reduces speeds to less than 30 mph.

John Black, traffic engineer for College Station, said the reduced speed limit allows a motorist to see the approaching train longer and increases reaction time.

Reducing the speed limit may increase collisions, Stutes said, due, in part, to the added time spent by trains in the city limits and by increased driver impatience.

According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, in 1982, the number of deaths decreased as train speeds increased. Between 30 mph and 60 mph; 138 people died while between 60 mph and 69 mph; 41 people died.

"I think that is reality," Locke said. "(But) You have to balance whether it's going too fast. I think 60 mph is too fast. Obviously if you have a train going 10 mph and somebody is at the track watching it poke along, you're going to have idiots who will try and run it."

"I guess it comes down to a question of how much society can hold in individual's hand."

Stutes said Southern Pacific recently spent more than \$400,000 to upgrade track through College Station. The Luther Street crossing has problems, Stutes said, but those are due to road conditions rather than a flaw in the track.

Railroad crossings have several jurisdictions depending upon the ownership of the road where the track intersects. Southern Pacific owns the actual track and is responsible for maintaining it, but Luther Street belongs to the city.

According to Locke, College Station wanted to close Luther Street at the crossing two years ago, but a lack of attention from Southern Pacific and railroad developers halted action.

"Negotiations were pretty much complete over a year ago," Locke said. "Southern Pacific kept the paperwork, the agreement for another year."

The City Attorney said requests to find the disposition of the agreement produced responses of, "We are working on it."

Development in the area caused Luther Street to be used by more people than it was originally intended.

"That street is to serve those industrial plants," Locke said, "it's not to serve those apartment complexes. That's why Marion Pugh was put in."

report." Marion Pugh parallels Wellborn Road between Jersey and Luther streets. "Now when we start talking about things like closing the Luther Street crossing, we're talking about building other streets, getting the road to build a crossing at Holleman building traffic lights, building warning signals at Holleman and getting the traffic routed on a different crossing," Black said. "That's not something I can do immediately after finishing the report."

Original plans by College Station called for Luther Street to be closed and Holleman Road to be extended across Wellborn Road and the railroad. Holleman is complete except for those crossings.

The Luther Street report was begun by the city after the two fatal accidents at that crossing. Black said the report is 90 percent complete.

Although he would not talk specifically about his findings, Black said he does not believe the crossing represents a dangerous situation. The grade between Wellborn Road and the Luther Street crossing has a 16 percent grade, while a 24 percent grade is considered unsafe. The grade is determined by the percentage change of a foot in the vertical over a foot in the horizontal.

"Sixteen percent in Texas is steep," Black said. "If you go to some other parts of the country, say Colorado, people don't think twice about that kind of grade. Some people have more than that in their driveway."

However, approaching the crossing from Wellborn Road, it is virtually impossible to see over the tracks.

Stutes said improvements in any crossing may take between one and three years because of governmental red tape.

"It takes that long because you've got to realize everything that's in a motion," Stutes said. "The city council has to react, they have to notify the state and the state has to react and do certain studies. The final analysis determines whether they can go to the federal government and get the funds to do the work. If they have the funds, they have to contact the railroad who does an engineering study and tells them the materials needed."

Federal funds for city street crossings generally pay 90 percent of the cost for installing automatic warning devices. The remaining 10 percent may be paid by the city or state. Should any crossing fall below the "priority line" for federal funds, a city can have additional warning signals installed by paying 90 percent of the cost. The remaining 10 percent must be paid by the city.

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There are no easy solutions for the Luther Street crossing

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