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System cuts train-crossing hazards

By JILL BUTLER
Of The Battalion Staff

The number of traffic accidents at railroad crossings in Texas has declined by about 25 percent during the past seven years.

Texas' unique railroad notification program might have contributed to this decline, according to a study of the program conducted by the Texas Transportation Institute at Texas A&M. Jack Lamkin, a research economist at TTI, was in charge of studying the 7-year-old program for the Federal Railroad Administration and the U.S. Department of Public Safety. "The program is basically an early warning system to alert railroads of problems with signals at rail-highway crossings," Lamkin said. As part of the program, a toll-free telephone number is located on signs at 2,002 of the 13,747

railroad crossings in Texas. Motorists who notice crossing signal problems can call the toll-free number 24 hours a day and report malfunctions.

Members of the communication section of the Department of Public Safety in Austin answer the calls. The railroad company responsible for the problematic crossing is notified, but is not required to take any action.

Texas is the only state with a large number of railroad crossings and a railroad notification program. Delaware has a similar program with one railroad and about 12 crossings.

"There is a strong possibility that other states may adopt railroad notification programs similar to Texas," Lamkin said.

Although the program is not highly publicized, TTI's study indicates a high response rate.

Almost 20,000 calls have been received since the program began in September 1983.

"Both the public and railroad companies have accepted the low-cost program," Lamkin said.

The program, mandated by the Texas Railroad Crossings Safety Information Act, was created because some railroad crossing systems malfunctioned and motorists thought a train was coming when one wasn't.

"Anytime you give drivers wrong information, you've created an unsafe situation," Lamkin said.

However, Lamkin does not blame signal problems for all 13,875 crossing accidents in Texas from 1980 to 1988.

"I believe most vehicle-train accidents are caused by automobile drivers not paying attention and not being aware."

Sick children may be losers in budget battle

AUSTIN (AP) — A budget struggle between state leaders and the Texas Department of Health erupted Monday over a program for severely ill children. Caught in the crossfire are parents and doctors who say a lack of funding will result in deaths.

"They're aware," Health Commissioner Robert Bernstein said when asked if he had discussed the funding problem with state budget leaders. "At this point, there is no promise of financial assistance."

But lawmakers said they want health officials to answer questions about the Chronically Ill and Disabled Children's Services Program, which was criticized in a recent state audit for poor planning and general disagreement over the program's objectives.

The Texas Board of Health on Saturday will consider cutting the program, which funds last-resort medical needs, by \$9.1 million in order to keep the service going through the end of the fiscal year.

The cuts would reduce hospital and rehabilitation services to all eligible children and would bar some 4,100 children who receive Medicaid from the program.

Sweet revenge

Students strand professor

By JILL BUTLER
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Many students would jump at the chance to get back at professors for impossible tests and boring classes, but never get the opportunity for revenge.

In January, 38 students on a Texas A&M animal production class field trip had no premeditated plans, but accomplished a feat that would make revenge-seeking students jealous.

The students accidentally forgot Dr. Howard Hesby, an animal science professor, at a convenience store in New Mexico.

"I've been taking my classes on field trips since 1973 and I've forgotten a few students at various places, but this is the first time I've ever heard of a professor being forgotten," Hesby said.

The group traveled in three vans through North Texas, West Texas and into Colorado from Jan. 4 to Jan. 14.

"I was the only sponsor on the trip," Hesby said. "I would switch and ride in a different van every now and then."

Near the end of the trip, on the way to Amarillo for the night, the group stopped at a convenience store in Clayton, N.M., at 1:30 a.m.

When he was ready to leave, Hesby walked outside but the vans were gone.

"I thought they were playing tricks on me so I walked around the building, but I didn't see the vans anywhere."

A man and woman told Hesby they saw the vans heading back toward Texas.

"The students checked to see if all the students were

there, but nobody checked to see if I was there," Hesby said.

"I would've gotten a ride with a trucker, but nobody was headed toward Texas at one in the morning," he said.

Hesby called the Clayton Police Department, but the officers were breaking up a barroom brawl and couldn't leave to catch the vans.

Hesby called the New Mexico State Patrol and the Texas State Patrol.

"It was really ironic, but there were no available patrol cars in either state," Hesby said.

Then Hesby called the police in Delhart, Texas, and asked them to stop the three vans headed for Amarillo.

The officers stopped the vans and told one of the student drivers they had forgotten someone in New Mexico.

"The funny thing was that the students kept denying they had left someone until the officers told them it was their professor," Hesby said. "They never thought about me."

One van was sent to pick up Hesby 70 miles away, while the other two vans waited in Delhart.

"If the police hadn't stopped the vans in Delhart, the students probably wouldn't have noticed I was gone until it came time to pay for gas," Hesby said. "They didn't have any money."

Hesby was good-natured about the incident, but warned other students about accidentally or purposely forgetting one of their professors somewhere.

Hesby made his students pay for the extra gas it took to pick him up.

Airborne



Photo by Frederick D. Joe

Sixteen-year-old Bryan High School sophomore Heath Smith and classmates enjoy a school inservice day Monday by riding their skateboards behind the Reed McDonald Building.

Humana needs volunteers

Texas A&M students who are interested in volunteer work at Humana Hospital-Brazos Valley can attend a meeting at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday in the hospital classroom.

Volunteer job openings are available in each department. Students can work days or evenings because Humana has an around-the-clock volunteer program.

Volunteers will work a maximum of eight hours each week. All A&M students are welcome, especially those interested in a career in the health care field.

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