

RR-xings get safety upgrade

Every day 150 trains travel through Wisconsin, often at speeds of 60-79 mph. In the process they cross streets and highways at nearly 5000 locations most of them unprotected, at-grade crossings. That's a lot of opportunities for vehicle-train collisions.

Every grade crossing in the state is getting better markings, under orders from the State Commissioner of Railroads. The railroads began last year installing new crossbucks signs and putting reflectorized tape on the sign posts. The project should be completed in 2002.

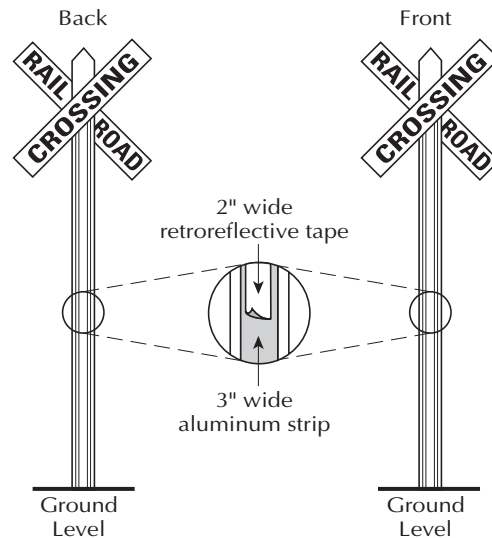
These new markings make the crossings more visible at night, especially on dark rural roads. Reflectorized tape on the front and back of every post not only delineates the crossing, but also helps motorists recognize when there is a train in it. Studies in several other states show that when headlights shining on the tape between the passing train cars there is a very noticeable flickering or strobe effect.

"It's a way to improve safety right away at a lot of crossings," says Doug Wood of the Commissioner's office. The number of crashes and frequency of fatalities at rural crossings is disproportionately high. "Once trains are going more than 40 mph there is a huge increase in the number of fatalities," he says.

Upgrades are being done in segments along the rail corridors. The first ones were installed last summer on the Wisconsin and Southern line.

This program is an opportunity for local streets and highway agencies to review their crossings for proper advance warning signs and visibility triangles. The agency that owns the road is responsible for putting up the familiar round signs (available free from the railroads through the County Highway agency).

Trains are also supposed to be visible from 330 feet down the track from the center of the intersection. Local



All Wisconsin railroad grade crossings are getting new signs and reflective tape.

agencies are responsible for clearing brush and trees that obscure this vision corner for 330 feet down their right of way. They should also work with landowners when brush on private land obstructs driver vision.

For intersections where brush on private land is a hazard, you may want to secure an easement and do the clearing with your own crews. It would be similar to a construction easement, and would formalize the arrangement.

Considering that a car or a train going 60 mph will take less than 4 seconds to travel 330 feet, it's a very small, but possibly crucial margin of safety.

For more information contact Doug Wood at 608/266-9536, email: Woodd@psc.state.wi.us

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