

From 350 to fewer than 100 crashes per year

The Office of Rail Transportation (ORT) at the Iowa DOT attributes the significant reduction in highway-rail crossing accidents over the past 25 years to three E's: engineering, enforcement, and education.

Engineering

Warning signals have advanced in technology and availability. There are more signalized crossings than there were 25 years ago and fewer rail lines.

Enforcement

With advances in technology, rail-crossings are more reliable (e.g., fewer instances of flashing lights when no train is present). Therefore, law enforcement is in a better position to enforce violations at rail crossings like going around a lowered rail gate.

Education

ORT has taken part in educating and training students about rail crossing safety through a federal program called Operation Lifesaver.

For more information about Operation Lifesaver, visit its website at www.oli.org, or contact Jaraine Mohs, 1636 Reagan Drive, Ames, IA 50010, iowa4ol@aol.com.

Funding is available to improve highway rail crossing safety

IN THE LAST 25 years, Iowa has reduced at-grade, highway-rail crossing crashes from about 350 a year to fewer than 100 (see sidebar). Still, in 2000 the state ranked ninth in the nation for number of fatalities and fourteenth for number of injuries from such crashes.

As part of its safety efforts, the FHWA allocates about four million dollars annually to the Iowa DOT to help the state's transportation agencies and rail companies improve crossings where crashes are most likely to occur.

James Gibson, rail crossing safety fund manager for the Iowa DOT's Office of Rail Transportation (ORT), urges local agencies and railroad companies to apply for funds to upgrade potentially dangerous crossings.

"Communities can't receive help if they don't apply."

—Peggy Baer
Rail Transportation Director
Iowa DOT

If your upgrade application is approved, the ORT will fund 90 percent of the cost of approved improvements.

Apply for 2004 upgrade monies

This is a good time of year to apply, before winter road maintenance and spring road projects usurp "unessential" paperwork.

The ORT recently sent county and city road engineers, mayors, and clerks current data about at-grade crossings in their jurisdictions. The data include a predicted accident ratio for each crossing based on crash histories and many other factors.

Any crossing with at least 0.075 predicted accident ratio (a "priority-one" crossing) is automatically a top candidate for upgrade funding.

To date, the ORT has received upgrade applications for only a few of the state's 61 priority-one crossings, so funds have been awarded to many non-priority-one crossings. According to Gibson, "Only three or four projects out of the 31 we are currently funding have an accident average that gives them priority one."

"Communities can't receive help if they don't apply," says Peggy Baer, Iowa DOT rail transportation director.

Each fall, cities and counties receive current data about at-grade crossings in their jurisdictions, including predicted accident ratios.

How to apply

Railroad companies are responsible for engineering and constructing railroad crossings and must follow the upgrading regulations outlined in Chapter 8 of the MUTCD. Once local agencies have identified crossings for possible upgrades, they need to work closely with rail companies that own the crossings.

To apply for crossing safety upgrade monies, follow these steps:

1. Evaluate the site carefully to determine what factors—obstacles, road quality, etc.—will influence upgrade design. Meet with railroad owners to develop upgrade plans.
2. Work with the railroad to determine how your agency and the company will split the 10 percent of project cost that would not be covered by an ORT award.
3. Contact the ORT to receive an application. Both the railroad and the local agency must sign the completed application. **Return it to ORT before August 1, 2003.**

For more information

For more information about highway-rail crossing safety, including the upgrade application process, contact the ORT, 515-239-1140, www.iowarail.com.

Section G4.1 of *Iowa Traffic Control Devices and Pavement Markings: A Manual for Cities and Counties* highlights requirements from the MUTCD. The manual is online, <http://www.ctre.iastate.edu/pubs/itcd/index.htm>, or contact Tom McDonald, 515-294-6384, tmcdonal@iastate.edu, for more information. •

