

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-1011

August 18, 2022

Amit Bose
Administrator
Federal Railroad Administration
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Administrator Bose,

I write in response to Federal Railroad Administration's (FRA) request for information about its Blocked Crossings Portal to share the experience of Georgia communities grappling with this issue. I appreciate that FRA is investigating the incidence of parked trains that can be frustrating for many Georgians, and in the worst case, deadly for others.

Addressing blocked rail crossings is about more than just convenience: Highway-rail grade crossing accidents, together with accidents caused by trespassing along the railroad right-of-way, account for 94% of all rail-related deaths and injuries.¹ For example, in the neighborhood of South Atlanta, it's not unusual to see children race across closing gates to get to school or adults walking between stopped cars to get to work on time². Less than four miles away, in Adair Park, a 61-year-old man lost his life when what he thought was a parked train started moving as he was attempting to cross the tracks³.

When freight trains block one or more major roads in our cities and towns it can also become a public safety issue. First responders are delayed in responding to calls for emergency medical assistance, fires, or cases of violence that need police intervention. Divided communities regularly deal with missed doctor's appointments, school tardiness, and the daily frustration of a 15-minute trip to the grocery store turning into an hour-long event. As the average length of a train has increased 25% since 2008, this problem is only getting worse as long trains can block more crossings in the same town.

To address this crisis, I worked with my colleagues in the Senate to pass the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which included the new Railroad Crossing Elimination program. The current notice of funding opportunity will address some of the most dangerous crossings, but more work is needed.

¹ <https://www.commerce.senate.gov/services/files/E475D567-4922-4C1C-806A-77BBCF8592FC>

² <https://www.ajc.com/life/opinion-residents-still-feeling-railroaded/2HM4HHIPLFH5TM5CCGKJIJWZ3A/>

³ <https://www.wabe.org/struggle-atlanta-crossing-reveals-power-railroads/>

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To review the larger, systemic issues, Congress also required the FRA to establish a Blocked Crossing Portal and collect information from the public and first responders. FRA's report will be a critical piece in understanding the full scope of this national issue.

The quality and accessibility of the website and any other tool that the FRA uses to gather this information will directly determine the quality of the data Congress later has to make informed policy decisions.

My staff and I have received comments and requests from constituents in every corner of Georgia that we want to ensure are captured in FRA's research. To make the Portal more accessible and functional for Georgians to use, I suggest:

- **Improved website interface.** The FRA's website is difficult to navigate and presents challenges such as using the search bar, identifying the correct railroad intersection, and knowing if and when to create a log-in. To meet this congressional mandate, the FRA is relying on citizens to participate during their daily lives; it should be a simple, intuitive process.
- **Innovative and mobile functionality.** This crowdsourcing platform should be easy to use, including on mobile devices. Partnerships with third-party applications, such as maps, could encourage people to report the blocked crossing.
- **Non-connected accessibility.** Many of these rail crossings are in places where broadband is still a major concern. A hotline posted at railroad crossings to call and report the blocked crossings would help ensure those without high speed internet access can participate.
- **Language accessibility.** The FRA's website uses bureaucratic jargon that can be difficult anyone, especially for a non-native English-speaker to understand. In addition to using more accessible language, this tool should be translated into multiple languages to be easily understandable to a larger number of people.

I have attached letters from community leaders in the state of Georgia who have struggled both with blocked crossings and using the current portal. It is my hope that you take these, as well as their suggestions and feedback into consideration as you continue to improve this tool.

Sincerely,



Senator Jon Ossoff



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County Manager

Stephanie Braun
County Clerk

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July 27, 2022

Amit Bose
Administrator
Federal Railroad Administration
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Mr. Bose:

This letter is to share the inconvenience and the challenges the citizens of Henry County, Georgia experience almost daily due to trains blocking our roads for extended periods at critical junctures in our community. Specifically, we have the following issues and concerns regarding our railroad crossings:

- Blocking railroad crossings for extended periods jeopardize public safety.
- Blocking of the railroad crossings happen at all hours of day with no regard for the time of day.
- The trains that block the crossings are extremely long and take a lot of time to clear the crossings.
- We are very interested in any federal funding availability or opportunity that will help us construct overpass or underpass to alleviate traffic blockage at the railroad crossings.
- Henry County is open to collaborating with all the parties to find a solution regarding trains blocking cars and trucks and that include the railroad companies.
- With the deepening and expansion of the Port of Savannah, amount of freight movement will only increase over time. The products from the port must move in a timely manner and cannot sit idle on railroad tracks for extended periods blocking traffic in our community.

Thank you for your consideration of the issues I have listed above. Should you have any questions or would like to discuss this further, I can be reached at charrell@co.henry.ga.us or 770-288-6001.

Sincerely,

Carlotta H. Harrell
Chair
Henry County Board of Commissioners

cc: Cheri Hobson-Matthews, County Manager

DAVID H. DICKEY
I. GREGORY HODGES
ROBERT W. SCHIVERA (GA & NC)
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JAMES P. GERARD
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July 28, 2022

Honorable Jon Ossoff
United States Senator for the State of Georgia
Suite 455, Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

RE: Blocked Railroad Crossings in Garden City Georgia

Dear Senator Ossoff:

For the last 30 years, Garden City has attempted to work towards bringing relief to residents and businesses in the City who have been contending with a high volume of lengthy road blockages caused by the rail operations of CSX Rail Corporation. Even though City officials have, in the past, been able to set up meetings with representatives of CSX to discuss the problems and come up with potential solutions, nothing has ever improved the situation. Soon after each such discussion, the City continues to get calls about blockages from residents and business owners. For the last five years, the blockages have been for more than two hours. Garden City Mayor Don Bethune continues telling CSX that the blockages are killing the community.

Even though the City has ordinances on its books which regulate the time during which a train may block road-rail grade crossings in the City, it has been informed that such ordinances are preempted by the provisions of the Interstate Commerce Commission Termination Act ("ICCTA"), 49 U.S.C Section 10101, et seq., and the Federal Railroad Safety Act ("FRSA"), 49 U.S.C Section 20101, et seq. The City has also been told that the Federal Railroad Administration has no regulations concerning the amount of time a train may block a crossing. As a result, the City has been given the impression that the trains can block roads for any reason with impunity. It is time for the federal government to take the problem of blocked crossings seriously due to the effects on safety (e.g., impeding the movement of emergency response vehicles), and the effect on citizens' quality of life. Even though the Federal Railroad Administration (the "FRA") has encouraged railroads to work with communities such as Garden City to minimize disruptions to road traffic, the railroad has not taken the lead on doing so.

The most serious railroad crossing blockages have occurred at CSX Crossing Number 632475M on Priscilla D. Thomas Way in the Rossignol Hill neighborhood. Since the beginning of the year, there have been at least 10 blockages of an hour or more at this crossing. These blockages are especially dangerous in that Priscilla D. Thomas Way is the only road into and out of a residential area of the City. It is just a matter of time before someone dies having to wait at a crossing to get medical help. At one time, the suggestion was brought to the table that CSX would hold its trains outside of Garden City as they wait for access into the City for entry into the Port of Savannah so that they would no longer block areas such



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as Rossignol Hill. The plan was discussed by CSX but never permanently carried out. As a result, blockages are still being reported where the delay in the departure of one train is preventing a waiting train (blocking the road) from moving into the yard. It would seem that the logistical management of these trains is somewhat lacking and could be easily corrected.

Five years ago, several Garden City residents wrote Congressman Buddy Carter about the railroad blockage issue. I have enclosed copies of a portion of such correspondence. Even though the Congressman was able to re-open the issue for some discussion, nothing came of it and the problems ensued.

CSX has discussed the anticipated benefits that the Mega Rail Project currently underway at the Georgia Ports Authority will provide in the future with regards to the flow of railroad freight traffic. This project, however, is not scheduled to be completed for several years and, in the meantime, CSX has not provided any alternative short-term solutions for immediate relief. In May of this year, the City Manager spoke with a representative of CSX who had informed him that a member of the FRA staff had performed a site visit to investigate complaints about the blockages. According to the CSX representative, when the FRA representative inspected the area and remarked how the residents had knowingly built their homes between multiple tracks in proximity to an active railyard, he concluded that the blockages were unavoidable and not investigation worthy. When contacted about the remarks of its investigator, the FRA stated that its investigator's statement was a "highly inaccurate characterization." Regardless of whether the railroad tracks were built before or after the establishment of residential communities, regular occurring blockages of more than 40 minutes are well beyond any resident's reasonable expectations especially when 95% of such blockages are unjustified and evidence incompetence, gross negligence, and a "could not care less" attitude.

Since it appears that the City has explored every alternative available to it to fight these blockages, the City is looking to you to aid in the effort of forcing CSX to make some operational changes to reduce the number and time length of the railroad crossing blockages in the City. I appreciate your offer to help, and I am available to provide you with any additional information which you may need.

With kind personal regards, I am

Very truly yours,
OLIVER MANER LLP



JAMES P. GERARD
For the Firm

JPG/jlw
Enclosures
Cc: C. Scott Robider, Garden City Manager

Monroe County Board of Commissioners

Jim Hedges, County Manager
Ira Watts, Jr., Road Superintendent



Greg Tapley, Chairman
Lamarcus D. Davis, Vice Chairman
Eddie Rowland, District 2
John H. Ambrose District 3
George Emami, District 4

38 West Main Street - P.O. Box 189 - Forsyth, Georgia 31029 - Phone (478) 994-7000 - Fax (478) 994-7294

July 25, 2022

Senator Ossoff,

While I am very aware of issues caused by trains blocking crossings and glad to share my experiences, I think it is better if you hear it from a resident who has dealt with it directly on a daily basis. Below is a letter I asked her to submit along with her journal of the blockages she has experienced.

Thank you!

Gregory V. Tapley

Gregory V. Tapley
Chairman
Monroe County Board of Commissioners
P.O. Box 189
Forsyth, GA 31029
478-994-7000
gtapley@monroecoga.org

P.S. Thanks so much for meeting with us in D.C. It was great seeing you.

From: Andrea Goolsby [REDACTED]
Sent: Wednesday, July 20, 2022 10:09:57 PM
To: Greg Tapley <GTapley@monroecoga.org>
Subject: Railroad

Dear Senator Ossoff,

When we think of the little town of Juliette, GA, trains and fried green tomatoes from the Whistle Stop Cafe come to mind. Before the filming of the movie, there wasn't much hustle and bustle in my early childhood. One caution light and the sounds of the river flowing over the dam with the occasional train whistle blowing. The train in Juliette is more than just something we think about or watch pass through. It significantly impacts the day to day life of the residents here and our neighbors in Jones County. It has been an issue for many years but seems to be happening way more frequently, where the train just stops blocking traffic for hours on end. The closest town for Juliette residents is Forsyth. A large number of us in this area travel into Forsyth for work, the closest interstate access to travel for work and school, get groceries and for healthcare. This is also where the closest emergency room is. This not only has an impact on our daily livelihood but can also be a matter of life and death. Especially with the limited cell service or close alternative route.

During the summertime the Ocmulgee River, just over the tracks, is a place where people from all over Central Georgia go to enjoy. The closest fire station is on the opposite side over the tracks in Juliette. The second, is further into East Juliette on the Jones County side. Neither one of these stations are manned daily and mainly rely on volunteer personnel.

Over the Summer of 2020, there were two incidences where emergency services were needed at the river for rescue. One particular emergency required a rescue boat and crew to go all the way around into Jones County via Hwy.18 to even be able to access the river due to the blocked crossing. The other incident, were two individuals who nearly drowned while kayaking in rough waters that had risen due to excessive rainfall. I shudder at what the outcome could be had the train been stopped, blocking the fastest way for help to get there.

July 30th, 2021, a lady was rear ended while the train was stopped. Monroe EMS were not able to get to her. The stretcher was placed under the train, she was loaded and then transported back under the train on a stretcher to be placed into the ambulance. The only alternative route is to go through Jones County and back around, 30 minutes out of the way. Our EMS personnel should never have to go into another county to get back into Monroe to respond to these calls. Nor, should they EVER have to place a patient on a stretcher and pass them under the train itself, so that they can receive medical attention in a timely manner.

On April 2nd, 2022, I witnessed a train within the City limits of Forsyth split at 2 different crossings and stopped just before the 3rd crossing to keep from blocking the traffic flow through town. On May 5th, 2022, I was finally able to speak with the Public Safety Director for Norfolk Southern, Mr. William Miller. I explained the daily frustrations and the disruption this crossing causes. This puts everyone at risk, including our EMS in the event of an emergency.

I will paraphrase his response. "I'm aware there were 2 different engines with mechanical issues. There is no track work going on. I'm looking at the map and it seems like a pretty rural area. I don't see many rooftops. There can't be that many people....." Because we're a rural area, that makes it okay?

I have a 12 year old son who is growing up on the same banks of the river as I did. I cannot fathom the outcome if he or someone in my family needed help down there and there be no faster route if that train is stopped. Juliette is full of hard working citizens, who deserve no less than any other big city. I speak for everyone when I say, we feel because we are in a rural area, we don't matter and are being railroaded. There has to be a resolution. I have a list of specific dates/times-also reported to the FRA site, and video footage, along with a host of citizens in the area who are fed up but helpless. We welcome any ideas and support to resolve this issue.

Sincerely,

Andrea Goolsby



Amit Bose
Administrator
Federal Railroad Administration
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Administrator Bose:

As you know the railroad crossings have been a problem for the east side of Jackson for some time. The elementary school and new housing in the past few years as well as the anticipated truck traffic from the Port of Savannah will cause the problems to grow quickly. I live off Stark Road across from Stark Elementary School. The railroad crossing on Ga Hwy 36 near Stark Road is a real problem in the morning when a train is crossing. The traffic trying to get to work and school comes to a stand still for the train to cross. It has taken 10 minutes or more at times to be able to move forward. There are always trains up and down at all times of the day. The length of the train can also affect the crossings on Benton and Lyons Streets, Ga Hwy 16 near Hwy 42 S, and Eighth Street near Hwy 42. It will also put a stand still to the traffic on Hwy 42 waiting to cross the track. The crossing at Eighth Street is also hazardous as the trucks hauling trailers can be stuck on the track due to the grade.

As you can see there are several crossings in a short distance but none of them may be viable for crossing at some times of the day. This puts increased time on public safety during an emergency at a home, the elementary school or daycare located on Stark Road.

I have talked to several people who know Jackson and the trestle behind Valley Road at the bottom of Oak Street keeps coming up as a possible way to move traffic under the tracks to the other side. I certainly don't pretend to know the answers but I do hope someone can find a way to move the traffic.

Thank you for any help you can give us!

Sincerely,
Kay Pippin
Former Mayor of the City of Jackson



Office of the City Manager, Jessica O'Connor
One Griffin Center | 100 S. Hill Street-P.O. Box T | Griffin, GA 30224
P 770.229.6408 F 678.692.0403 W cityofgriffin.com

August 9, 2022

Senator Jon Ossoff
Administrator Amit Bose
Via Email

Dear Senator Ossoff and Administrator Bose,

My name is Jessica O'Connor, and I am the City Manager for the City of Griffin. In my time with the City, we have experienced multiple issues (normally 2-3 times per week) with the train blocking the tracks in the middle of our downtown, which also happens to be a state highway (SR155). While we do have a bridge that goes over the tracks one block from the main intersection, this creates an abundance of delays and congestion throughout several blocks of downtown, specifically and most terrifyingly for our emergency management vehicles.

As a most recent example, last Friday, the train pulled through downtown and blocked two separate crossings that span approximately 5 city blocks. It started at 2:40, and when I left for the day at 4:54, it was still there. The amount of backlog the blocked crossings created required me to travel more than a mile out of the way. Although that sounds inconsequential, a mile in the timeframe of an emergency vehicle could be life or death. Unfortunately, this is a common occurrence in downtown Griffin and is a huge burden for the downtown businesses, the pedestrian traffic, the tractor trailers traversing SR155, the regular vehicular traffic, and the emergency management vehicles.

I sincerely hope the reckless action of the railroad in blocking crossings will be stopped. I would be happy to discuss this issue with you further, if needed, or tell the City's story to whomever is willing to listen. Thank you for asking this important question.

Sincerely,

Jessica W. O'Connor
City Manager

cc: City Commission
Mariza Eller, Public Works Director

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