Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen

A Division of the Rail Conference-International Brotherhood of Teamsters

OREGON STATE LEGISLATIVE BOARD
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Chairman

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Good morning and thank you for your time. My name is Chris Myron and am a locomotive engineer with nearly 17 years of railroad experience. I represent the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen in the state of Oregon. Today I wanted to talk about HB 3339. I was approached a couple of weeks ago about this bill and wanted to share some experiences I have had as a locomotive engineer and why this bill is important for public safety.

We have all been approaching a railroad crossing as the lights start to flash, even as an engineer I am not exempt from this and get stopped for trains from time to time. One of the first things that may happen is frustration, "oh man, I'm going to be late to where I'm going!" might be one of the first things that come to your mind. Maybe it's been a hectic morning, you're heading to work to provide for your family, news radio is doing its best to upset you, but so far you've been calm and collected. That is until the lights start flashing, the bell starts dinging, and the gates drop stopping you. You pull up and look to the left and right wondering which direction the train is coming from and how long it is. You see it approaching and it seems to be moving at a good pace, you ease back in your chair and watch as the rail cars roll passed you one at a time. You might glance at the clock, 7:52am. You need to be at work in eight minutes and it's only two blocks away. You should make it. The train rolls passed, you don't realize but it's going 30 mph and is around 8,000' long. It only takes about three minutes from when the gates drop to when the train clears. You pull into your work at 7:58am. It was your lucky morning.

Now let's look at another scenario which is becoming common.

But first, much of the public is unaware of exactly how trains operate, especially why trains go certain speeds in certain locations, so I wanted to give a quick overview. It's similar to road laws in that there are different "speed zones" depending on type of track, the condition of track, grade, curvature, and much more. Even certain trains are restricted to lower speeds depending on the type of cars it's carrying. For example, most yard tracks, where trains are assembled and pass through on their way to their final destination, are restricted to a maximum speed of 10 mph while a couple of miles away on a mainline the speed may raise to 50 mph. Other conditions effect this and the train may actually be going much slower than the speed limit assigned to that track. Trains are also required to be at the designated speed while their train is occupying that section until the rear of the train clears the limits. There is obviously much more to this but this gives a general overview of why trains go different speeds, even in the same area.

Back to the second scenario. The same situation applies, only this time the train is leaving a yard and is going 10 mph. It's also around 13,000'. This time it takes over 15 minutes to clear the crossing. Or let's go a step further, the train now stops on a passing track waiting to meet another train, or the train stops, backs up a few hundred feet, stops again, and just sits there unbeknownst to you it is doing a myriad of train and air brake checks before it can depart because it is picking cars up or setting cars out before it continues on its journey. In these scenarios the crossing may be blocked for 30 minutes or more. Don't believe it? I have personally been the train engineer many times in this scenario. And there is nothing preventing this, or from it becoming worse.

With the "do more with less" mantra, railroads in recent years have been growing their train sizes exorbitantly, always trying to maximize profits. More cars on a train means less trains to run. It's just

business to railroads. But at some point the public has to be made aware of these tactics for monster trains, and the simple effect a blocked crossing can have. That's why I believe HB 3339 is a start to holding railroads accountable to the effect they have on the public in regards to crossing occupation.

When I hired out 17 years ago, the average train length we ran through central and southern Oregon where I work ranged from 4,000-5,000' long with maybe 6,000' being a rare, super long train. Within the past few years, I have seen trains average 6,000-7,000' and now seeing trains close to around 13,000' long (and even longer from many reports). These trains travel through our communities and many major cities such as Bend, Eugene, Salem, Portland and many others have stations and/or yards requiring trains to slow, park, and even set-out and pickup cars. Of course many of the state's mainlines are single track that require a siding track to meet trains heading in the opposite directions, requiring the train that arrives first to stop and wait for the opposing train, sometimes an hour or more. Unfortunately, when railroads started the process of running longer trains, I highly doubt any serious thought was given to how this will affect the crossings in our state. Trains can quite literally sever a town in two.

We need to have a serious look at how there is nothing that limits trains from blocking crossings. When I hired out, there was even a rule about blocking crossings for longer than 15 minutes. Somewhere along the way that was deleted. I think if we all take a serious look at this issue, the common sense solution is that something must be done to address this, and I feel HB 3339 is a great start.

Let me close with one final scenario, take the second scenario I mentioned, but this time it's not you at the crossing for 15-30 minutes, it's an ambulance. A child that was riding his or her bike to school was struck by a car. Time matters in this case, unless of course you're a railroad that doesn't seem to take these matters seriously. Because as a locomotive engineer, I have been in all three scenarios, and I take this issue to heart.

I thank you for your time

Respectfully,

Christopher Myron
Chairman, Oregon State Legislative Board
Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (IBT)