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Blocked rail crossings present dangers, major delays in Southwest Side communities, Ald. Matt O'Shea tells congressional committee

By Zak Koeske Daily Southtown • Feb 13, 2020 at 11:16 am



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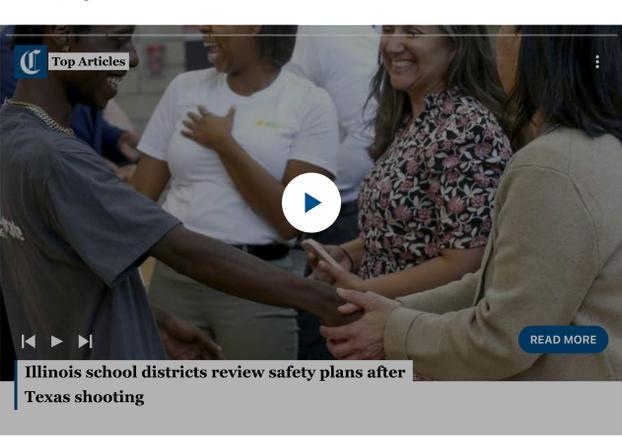


Chicago and Evergreen Park allege railroad operator CSX hasn't abided by a 2013 agreement meant to cut down on blocked rail crossings. (Patrick Semansky / AP)



In the seven years since CSX Transportation assumed control of a rail line that runs through communities on Chicago's Southwest Side and adjacent suburbs, a spate of blocked rail crossings have caused untold inconveniences for residents, Chicago Ald. Matt O'Shea testified before members of Congress.

The blockages, which in extreme cases trap people at crossings for several hours, have spurred children to climb through stopped trains, caused residents to arrive late to school or work, and made people miss flights and medical appointments, he told the U.S. House Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines and Hazardous Materials last week.



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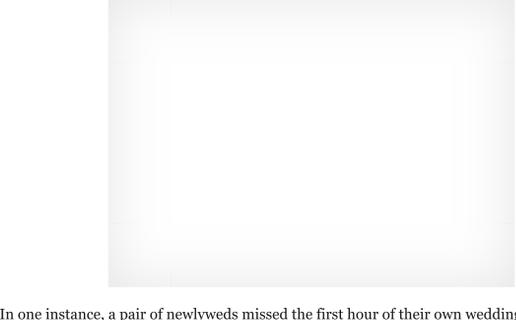
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In one instance, a pair of newlyweds missed the first hour of their own wedding reception due to a blocked crossing. Another time, a woman was prevented from saying her final goodbyes to her ailing grandfather who died before she arrived at a local hospital, the alderman said.

O'Shea, whose 19th Ward encompasses Beverly, Morgan Park and Mount Greenwood, said he wasn't aware of any lives lost due to blockages that impeded medical responses, but said the prospect greatly concerned him.

"Advocate Christ Medical Center (in Oak Lawn) is the only Level I trauma center on the Southwest Side, it's the busiest trauma center in the state of Illinois, and the chances of a stopped train along the Elsdon line preventing emergency responders from getting someone in distress to the hospital, there's a high likelihood of that," he said in an interview with the Southtown last week.



Chicago Ald. Matt O'Shea, 19th, testifies before a congressional subcommittee Feb. 5 regarding his concerns about blocked rail crossings in his ward. (Photo provided by Matt O'Shea)

O'Shea implored members of the rail subcommittee to sign a letter asking the Surface Transportation Board, the federal agency that regulates freight rail, to mandate the installation of a closed-circuit video system at Advocate Christ Medical Center to facilitate communication about blocked crossings between the railroad operator and the hospital.



He also asked members to enact regulations requiring all trains to clear at-grade crossings within three minutes and to establish penalties for any blockages that last 10 minutes or more.

Phil Davidson, a spokesman for U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski, who chairs the rail subcommittee, said the alderman's proposals were worth exploring and that the Western Springs congressman looked forward to working with him.

Any legislation of the sort O'Shea proposed would originate in Lipinski's subcommittee, Davidson said.

Cindy Schild, a CSX spokeswoman, said the company already had met its requirement to install a closed-circuit television system on the Evergreen Park municipal complex near the line's 95th Street crossing, but was willing to discuss adding another video connection with local hospitals.

She said the railroad's performance in recent months had been "exemplary" and added that CSX was committed to working with O'Shea and other local officials to "ensure the most fluid train operation possible over the Elsdon."

Community concerns about blocked crossings and malfunctioning gates on the Elsdon line, which runs parallel to Sacramento Avenue through much of Chicago's 19th Ward, date back years.

In February 2016, Chicago and Evergreen Park filed a formal complaint against CSX with the Surface Transportation Board alleging operational problems on the line, including excessive train idling, false gate activations and blocked crossings, and charging that the railroad had repeatedly violated conditions it agreed to uphold when it acquired the line in 2013.

The complaint sought fines, an independent audit of CSX's operations and possible service restrictions for the line.

Later that year, the transportation board ordered CSX to begin filing monthly reports documenting false gate activations and crossing blockages that exceeded 10 minutes.

CSX filed the reports each month for the next two years, but the number and duration of blocked crossings did not improve.

In July 2018, the board asked CSX to generate a plan detailing additional actions it would take to reduce the number and duration of blocked crossings before deciding whether additional action was necessary.

CSX's submitted plan discussed some actions to enhance performance, but disputed the board's conclusion that it needed to improve operations. The company asserted that some blockages were caused by non-CSX trains and argued the only operational step it could take to reduce lengthy blockages would be to reroute trains onto other lines.

Unable to reach a majority decision on how to proceed, the Surface Transportation Board has since declined to take any action in the dispute between the Southwest Side neighborhoods and CSX.

"The lack of accountability is troubling," O'Shea testified before the rail subcommittee Feb. 5. "Who will step in to respond when railroads aren't good neighbors? Why hasn't the STB levied fines or revoked CSX's operating agreement?"

"Since mid-2019, we have even further improved fluidity, increased interconnectivity with other railroads moving on the lin, and received positive feedback from the community," she said in a statement.

O'Shea conceded that conditions on the Elsdon line had improved over the past year and credited CSX for its efforts to mitigate operational issues, but questioned how long the positive changes would last.

"I just assume, as we've seen the last several years, there's always an ebb and a flow," he said, noting that national freight rail traffic was down across the board over the past year.

"At some point, rail traffic could increase nationwide and at any point CSX could decide to put more traffic on that line and we're going back to the same problems we've had."

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