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Grayslake concerned about stopped freight trains blocking roads

By Bob Susnjara Daily Herald

Citing safety concerns, Grayslake officials say they've had enough of frequent freight train stoppages that block traffic in the village, and they're encouraging residents to contact state and federal elected leaders for help.

In a resolution passed this month by the village board, officials say freight blockages on Canadian National Railway tracks have grown in the past year.

"These stoppages are causing significant delays in emergency response by the Grayslake Police Department and Fire Protection District," Mayor Rhett Taylor said in a message to residents. "These stoppages are also adversely impacting residents and businesses in Grayslake and the surrounding communities by worsening traffic congestion conditions."

CN responded that it works to minimize delays in a busy railroad corridor.

In the resolution, Grayslake says CN freight trains often stop to allow Metra commuter rail cars and others to pass on a second track through town. Stopped trains can block as many as four railroad crossings, according to the village.

Police Chief Phillip Perlini said the village typically has patrol officers on each side of the tracks to provide adequate protection no matter where a call originates. However, he said, call volumes and locations sometimes require officers to cross the tracks.

Major east-west thoroughfares such as Route 120 and Washington Street can be stymied by stopped trains, along with Center Street in downtown Grayslake.

"In emergencies or nonemergency situations, either rerouting or waiting for a train to clear a crossing wastes valuable response time," Perlini told the Daily Herald. "There are situations almost daily where responses are effected by train traffic, sometimes only by seconds and sometimes by several minutes."

CN spokesman Patrick Waldron said freight trains "do occasionally stop for short periods" in Grayslake to allow Metra cars to pass and avoid commuter train delays.

"We continually work to minimize any delays during the rush-hour periods for commuter trains and motorists along this busy railroad corridor," Waldron said.

Metra spokesman Michael Gillis noted CN controls dispatching of all trains traveling through Grayslake and owns the tracks on which Metra's North Central Line service operates.

"They are responsible for coordinating their freight trains with our scheduled commuter trains," Gillis said. "They certainly try to do it in such a way that the impact on area streets is minimized."

Among the suggestions made by Grayslake officials is construction of a second track for the stretch between Route 176 and Rollins Road. They contend that would eliminate the need for trains to stop to allow passing on the isolated double-track segment in the village.

Grayslake also wants CN and Metra to consider making schedule adjustments to eliminate the need for a train to halt and let another pass in the village. Another recommendation is to shift some train stoppages to areas north of Rollins and south of Route 176.

Because the village has no jurisdiction over railroads, officials say letters of concern have been written to state and federal senators and representatives. The village is urging residents to contact the legislators as well, and has provided a suggested letter they can use and tweak to suit their needs.

"A single community should not have to bear this burden alone," the suggested letter states. "I urge you to assist our village leadership on this important issue."

Democratic state Rep. Sam Yingling of Round Lake Beach, whose district includes the Grayslake area, is on the contact list of lawmakers for residents. He said he shares the safety concerns of Grayslake officials.

Yingling said he plans to discuss the situation with veteran Democratic state Rep. Elaine Nekritz of Northbrook, who's involved in freight and commuter train issues.

Grayslake Fire Protection District Chief John Christian said his firefighters and paramedics at the downtown station regularly contend with blocked intersections. He said he hopes there is a solution for what he terms a "serious problem."