

## **Union Pacific at odds with city and county over at-grade crossing on frontage road**

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<http://www.davisenterprise.com/local-news/union-pacific-at-odds-with-city-and-county-over-at-grade-crossing-on-frontage-road/>

Yolo County and the Union Pacific Railroad appear to be at loggerheads over a railroad crossing on a freeway frontage road east of Davis.

For several years, Union Pacific has sought to alter or close the at-grade crossing on Road 32A, citing safety issues in discussions with the county, the City of Davis and local farmers who heavily use the road.

Road 32A is one of two frontage roads on either side of I-80 between Davis and the Yolo Causeway — Road 32A runs parallel to the freeway on the north, while Chiles Road runs alongside the freeway to the south.

Commuters traveling from Davis to Sacramento and back have long used the frontage roads when traffic backs up on the freeway between Davis and the causeway.

Farmers, meanwhile, have used the roads to move large agricultural equipment and garbage trucks have used Road 32A when travelling to the landfill.

But while Chiles is a straightforward two-lane road, Road 32A includes an at-grade railroad crossing where the road meets Road 105. Here, drivers heading east make a sharp right turn, cross the railroad tracks, then make a sharp left turn to continue on toward the Causeway. Westbound drivers travel the same road in the opposite direction.

According to Union Pacific, the configuration of the road where it crosses the tracks has made for a notable number of accidents.

Some of those accidents have involved trains, the railroad has said, but the majority of the incidents reported during the past 10 years involve motor vehicles that have lost control, left the road, and come to rest on the right-of-way near, and sometimes on, the tracks.

Union Pacific has stated that all of the problems at the crossing are related to the configuration of the roads and the adjacent bike path and not the railroad tracks.

“The railroad track is unremarkable — straight and level with ordinary operations on it,” the railroad stated in a filing with the California Public Utilities Commission earlier this month.

But motorists approaching the crossing have changing speeds (from 55 miles per hour on the straightaway to the recommended 10 miles per hour approaching the curve) and line-of-sight changes, Union Pacific said.

“Too often they overshoot the curve in the road because of speed or inattention or fail to comply with traffic-control signs and warning devices at or near the crossing,” the railroad said.

“Incidents involving vehicles becoming stranded on the right-of-way are a particular danger because of the risk that the crew of an approaching train may not be aware of the presence of an immovable vehicle or have the ability to stop in time to avoid a collision.”

For the past few years, Union Pacific, the city and the county have discussed possible solutions, but a resolution agreeable to everyone has remained elusive.

According to the railroad, “proposals have included closing the crossing, adding traffic lights, making Road 32A a one-way street, adding additional warning devices and various other combinations of options.

“Although the parties have communicated together in good faith and made some minor or temporary changes, none of these efforts has led to agreement about what comprehensive and lasting changes should be made and how they can be achieved.”

Now Union Pacific appears ready to force the issue. The railroad has filed an application with the state Public Utilities Commission asking that Yolo County be ordered “to alter, relocate, or abolish by physical closing this crossing to promote safety for the public and for railroad operations.”

A pre-hearing conference on the matter is tentatively scheduled for Nov. 15.

Yolo County spokeswoman Beth Gabor said the county “is in the process of assessing all available options as the matter comes before the PUC.”

“The county and the City of Davis have discussed the issue of the (Road 32A) railroad crossing with Union Pacific for the last several years and Union Pacific has repeatedly made clear their desire to close the crossing,” Gabor said.

“Throughout those discussions, the county and city have stressed the importance of finding an alternative solution to closure, as the closure of (Road 32A) would increase traffic impacts on Mace Boulevard, potentially create property access issues and would significantly hinder agricultural equipment movement,” Gabor said.

Yolo County Supervisor Jim Provenza, whose district includes the crossing, said he has serious concerns.

Closing the crossing, he noted, essentially closes Road 32A, meaning the traffic normally travelling along that route would either move to Chiles Road or enter or exit the freeway at Mace Boulevard.

Additionally, large waste trucks that usually take Road 32A when travelling to the county landfill would instead have to exit the freeway at Mace Boulevard, creating multiple safety and congestion issues, Provenza said.

And should an innovation center be built in that location, the problems would be even more significant, he noted.

Farmers, meanwhile, have concerns as well, as they use Road 32A regularly for moving large equipment.

Provenza said he believes additional traffic signs, better lighting and other measures could eliminate safety concerns.

“It’s not like we haven’t been looking at different ideas,” he said, adding that he believes the problems that Union Pacific believes are caused by the crossing “are a little bit exaggerated.”

“But the implications of actually closing it are significant,” Provenza said.

Meanwhile, Union Pacific wants the PUC to consider what alterations to the configuration of Road 32A, Road 105 or both are necessary to improve safety; whether changes in speed limits or warning signs would improve safety; whether the Road 32A railroad crossing should be relocated; whether the crossing should be grade-separated to improve safety; or if the crossing should simply be closed.