

## Morton Marcus: Railing about rail crossings



By MORTON J. MARCUS

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INDIANAPOLIS - The Indiana Department of Transportation reports Indiana “has more at-grade public rail-highway crossings than all but four other states.” Safety and efficiency at these crossings and in the areas around them are extremely important. Lives are of primary importance. However, local emergencies, the time of travelers, the air quality impact of idling motors, and the damage to vehicles, are also of consequence.

An inventory of Indiana at-grade rail crossings lists 16,464. Some are active and some inactive. But all are important if we drive across them and they are not properly maintained.

Lake County may be the winner with 968 such crossings, 279 in Gary. Allen Co. has 405 with 201 in Fort Wayne; Vigo Co. 345 with 262 in Terre Haute; Bartholomew Co. 141 with 94 in Columbus.

The Federal Railway Administration (FRA) presses for closures and money is available to areas where closures take place. But it is not right to close every crossing. There are local considerations deserving attention by local governments.

Two Indiana examples are worth examining:

On May 26, 2022, the Norfolk Southern Railroad called the Starke County Highway superintendent about closing a rail crossing. The railroad then sent a letter - a petition - to the county commissioners who were advised by the County Attorney to hold a public meeting which took place on July 5th. The overwhelming response from Starke County citizens was against closure. Ten days later the Commissioners denied the petition. Matter closed, not the crossing.

Compare that with a similar situation in Brown County. The Indiana Railroad Company petitioned on May 20, 2019, the county commissioners to close the crossing at Indian Hill Road near Trevlac.

The commissioners approved the petition on May 6, 2020, despite the fact the law requires a public hearing. Without that public hearing, the Commissioners did not know their decision cut the popular Tecumseh Trail in two.

This trail is an important part of the Governor’s Trail Initiative, a significant element in his Indiana Destination Development program. The latter effort is a long-delayed recognition of Indiana’s natural attractions (think of our Dunes National Park) as critical components in a comprehensive economic development package.

On July 20, 2022, a local attorney presented an amendment to the resolution passed 26 months earlier. All that was needed was a clarification that closing the crossing to vehicular traffic did not mean closing off pedestrians.

State Rep. Matt Pierce supported the amendment and an unaffiliated Brown County resident spoke favorably of hiking with his son on the trail. The commissioners present acknowledged their previous lack of information and expressed support for restoring pedestrian access.

We don't know yet, for certain, what will happen in Brown County, but again we have learned the power of following the law and including the public in decision making.

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