

How do I report a problem at a crossing?

Answer:

All railroads have 1-800 numbers to report emergencies or other problems. Most crossings should have a small plaque with the appropriate 1-800 number and a crossing identification number posted on the active warning devices or signage. You can also refer to the [MDOT rail map](#) and the [railroad emergency numbers](#) we have on record to determine the appropriate contact number. Railroads are responsible for active warning devices and crossing surfaces. Road agencies are responsible for most signs, traffic signals and roadway approaches.

Special Note: In the event of power loss or malfunction, flashing lights and gates are designed to continuously activate until a railroad maintenance crew can make repairs.

Who is responsible for the maintenance of warning devices at a crossing?

Answer:

Under Federal Railroad Administration guidelines, the railroad is responsible for certain monthly and annual inspections and the general maintenance of active warning devices. By state law, unless otherwise agreed upon, the cost of active warning device maintenance is split 50/50 between the railroad and the agency with jurisdiction over the road. The typical road agency share of the cost for maintaining active warning devices is approximately \$1000 annually per crossing. Any highway traffic signals which may be connected to the railroad warning system are the responsibility of the road agency, along with signs (that are not mounted on active warning devices) and pavement markings.

Special Note: When replacing signs at crossings, road agencies should transfer any USDOT national inventory identification tags to the new post.

Who is responsible for a crossing's surface?

Answer:

Per state statute, railroads are responsible for maintaining surfaces from the middle of the rails to one foot beyond the end of the ties and road authorities are responsible for the remainder. The condition of the crossing surface should be comparable to the condition of the adjacent roadway.

Why aren't there lights and gates at every railroad crossing?

Answer:

Just as traffic signals are not installed at every intersection, many highway-railroad grade crossings simply do not have the volume of vehicular or train traffic that would justify the expense of installing and maintaining automatic warning devices. However, each

year MDOT reviews public crossings statewide to identify crossings for potential safety enhancements. This process takes into consideration average daily vehicle traffic, daily train moves, vehicle and train speeds, sight distances and other specific crossing characteristics. Diagnostic Study Team Reviews are then conducted at these crossings, and any resulting safety enhancements are identified and funded in accordance with all relevant federal and state regulations.

Who can I call to get lights and gates installed at a public highway-railroad crossing?

Answer:

Contact your local road authority. Local road authorities can request a [Diagnostic Study Team Review](#), which is a meeting convened by MDOT to investigate crossing conditions. At a DSTR, representatives from the local road agency, the railroad and MDOT review safety issues and determine safety enhancements for the crossing. Following the DSTR, MDOT may issue an order for any necessary warning devices.

Special Note: Adding warning devices to a crossing can be time-consuming and expensive. Costs can be over \$250,000 and installation can take up to 18 months, depending on the complexity of the work. Projects initiated in this manner are funded by the railroad and local road authority, in accordance with state law.

We're planning a road project near a crossing – who should we contact?

Answer:

Road authorities should submit a [Diagnostic Study Team Review request](#) or call MDOT Rail Safety at 517-335-2592. Due to the lead time required for potential railroad work, road authorities should contact Rail Safety at least 10-12 months in advance of a project. We will review the situation and determine if a Diagnostic Study Team Review will be needed.

Does MDOT inspect crossings?

Answer:

Yes, the physical conditions are reviewed and warning device inventories are monitored at public at-grade crossings approximately every two years. Respective railroads and road authorities are notified of any deficiencies and MDOT Rail Safety works to ensure corrections.

However, Rail Safety never tests automatic warning devices to assure they are functioning properly. Testing is the responsibility of the railroad and/or road authority, based on the type of device.

Do I need a permit to cross a rail line with a utility line, driveway, etc?

Answer:

Yes, contact the appropriate railroad company. You can refer to the [MDOT rail map](#) to determine which company that is. [Railroad contact information](#) is also provided.

To cross a [state-owned rail line](#), please complete and submit the [on-line permit request](#). For additional information, contact the MDOT Real Estate Support Area at 517-373-9985 or MDOT Rail Property Management at 517-373-2915.

Why does the state own railroad lines?

Answer:

In the mid-1970s, the railroad industry entered an era of downsizing. Some carriers went bankrupt and other infrequently used lines were put up for abandonment. This affected approximately 1,100 miles of rail line in Michigan. The State of Michigan recognized that while a railroad may have been infrequently used, the availability of rail service served an important economic purpose to the state. Therefore, the Legislature authorized the purchase and preservation of some of these lines which were specifically identified to be in the best interest of the state and its citizens. MDOT currently manages about 530 miles of rail line and contracts with private railroad companies to provide service to shippers on those lines. MDOT has made substantial improvements to the infrastructure of these lines while the contract operators work to stabilize and increase the traffic base. With the expectation that the lines can now once again be viable in private hands, the Legislature passed a law in 1998 requiring that MDOT systematically divest most of these lines.

Is there state money available to help build or upgrade a rail spur or rail line?

Answer:

Yes, eligible projects can qualify for funding assistance through MDOT's [Freight Economic Development Program](#). The Freight Economic Development Program supports rail infrastructure improvements that help create or retain jobs in the state and utilize Michigan's rail system. Applications are accepted throughout the year.

Loans for rail infrastructure projects also may be available through the State Infrastructure Bank. Contact [Deanna Finch](#), State Infrastructure Bank Coordinator, at 517-241-4778 for more information.

How do I get a new crossing?

Answer:

Local road authorities or railroads desiring to create a new at-grade public highway or non-motorized trail crossing should request an [evaluation](#). MDOT Rail Safety will review the proposal with the road authority and operating railroad. Rail Safety will determine whether a proposed new public crossing is necessary, feasible and can be made reasonably safe. All costs associated with a new public crossing (crossing surface and any applicable active warning devices) are the responsibility of the party requesting the crossing.

Can MDOT help me eliminate a crossing?

Answer:

Yes, MDOT's [Local Grade Crossing Program](#) offers assistance for three types of projects that eliminate active public railroad crossings: 1) MDOT can make a cash incentive payment to a road agency for closing a public road at the tracks and eliminating the existing crossing; 2) MDOT can contribute toward a railroad's project to relocate active track and eliminate an existing public crossing; and 3) MDOT can make a cash incentive payment to a road authority that eliminates an existing public crossing by constructing a grade separation.

Why do trains sound their horns?

Answer:

The Federal Railroad Administration requires locomotive horns to be sounded at all public highway-railroad crossings, unless the crossing is part of a federally recognized quiet zone and/or equipped with wayside horns. Horns should be sounded approximately fifteen to twenty seconds before the train's arrival, but no more than one-quarter mile in advance of the crossing. A pattern of two long, one short and one long horn blasts is generally required, but can be varied if crossings are closely spaced. Train horns are an audible warning for motorists and pedestrians, but horns are also used as train crew communication for operational safety purposes.

How do we create a quiet zone?

Answer:

See the [Federal Railroad Administration](#) for information about quiet zones.

Is there a limit to how long a train can block a roadway?

Answer:

No. Restricting the amount of time a train can occupy a crossing is an infringement on interstate commerce. In 2002, a federal court ruled that a state law restricting crossing blockages was unenforceable. Only the federal government can regulate interstate commerce, and no restrictions currently exist.

Who sets train speeds through communities?

Answer:

The Federal Railroad Administration sets maximum allowable speeds for freight and passenger operations based on track conditions. Most freight trains can travel 45-60 mph, and Amtrak passenger trains reach speeds up to 110 mph in certain portions of the state.

How can an unused railroad line be converted to a trail?

Answer:

Railroads are regulated by the federal government and operate under “common carrier” authority. When a rail line, or portion of a rail line, is no longer needed for rail freight services, the railroad can file with the [Surface Transportation Board](#) (STB) for the authority to abandon the line. Abandonment is a formal, expensive and sometimes time-consuming process designed to make sure no rail customers are irreparably harmed. Following abandonment, some lines are retained for potential future rail use while being developed as trails in the interim. Other lines are sold outright. Michigan law mandates that abandoned rail lines must be offered for sale to both MDOT and Michigan Department of Natural Resources before being offered to any other party.