

Public Comment ORIGINAL

165 Scottswood Road  
Riverside, IL 60546-2221  
April 20, 2008

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Illinois Commerce Commission  
RAIL SAFETY SECTION

Illinois Commerce Commission  
160 North LaSalle Street, 8<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Chicago, Illinois

Subject: Case Number T08-0051: BNSF Railroad Request to Close Longcommon Pedestrian Tunnel, Riverside, Illinois

Dear Illinois Commerce Commission:

**Introduction:** My husband and I are writing about the BNSF Railroad's request to close the pedestrian tunnel under the railroad at Longcommon Road in Riverside, Illinois. We understand that the case for closing of the tunnel has been presented to the ICC as if it is only a question of convenience for a few Metra-BNSF commuters. Indeed, my husband has been a daily rail commuter who frequently takes unusually early or late trains. Over the last 20 years he has found it convenient to use the tunnel at least two or three times a month when he returns home and one or two trains happen to be on other tracks. However, in the morning, commuters are forced to use the tunnel or miss their train and he sees that forced use occur for himself or others three or four times a month. The claim that it "will pose no inconvenience to the traveling public.." is simply not true. It should at least be edited to read "...will pose only moderate inconvenience to the traveling public..."

However, although that inconvenience is real, I am writing primarily to raise a different, more important issue. It is the **safety of school and swim club children**. Specifically, I have personal stories to tell. Also, from the railroad's financial viewpoint, I would like to raise the question of cost effectiveness of repairing the tunnel vs. the railroad's liability for the next accident that, unfortunately, would be more likely to occur if the tunnel were to be closed.

**Background Information:** We moved to Riverside over 20 years ago (March 1987) and have lived in the same house on the south side of the railroad tracks which are now owned by the BNSF railroad. Our children were starting grade school at the time of our move. They attended the three regular public schools for our neighborhood: Central Grade School, Hauser Junior High School and Riverside|Brookfield (R|B) High School. All three schools are on the opposite (north) side of the tracks from our neighborhood, thereby requiring our kids to cross the tracks at least twice each day on their walks to and from school. This geographical divide also applies to approximately 1/3 of the houses in Riverside plus additional residences south of Riverside that are also in the same school districts.

For us, the schools are close enough and the street crossings few enough and well guarded so that we needed to drive them to school only rarely when weather or special school projects required it. The BNSF Railroad grade crossing at Longcommon is on a convenient fairly direct walking path for both Central and Hauser. However, we are separated from R|B high school by not only the railroad, but also the Des Plaines River and First Avenue (Illinois Route 171.) (Please see mark-ups on attached Mapquest map.) Furthermore, from our more limited southwest Riverside neighborhood the shortest safe route is still over the Longcommon crossing but it doubles the walking distance compared to the teenager-perceived most direct route: through the woods and over the railroad bridge.

A similar opposite flow of unescorted children occurs at the BNSF crossing all summer. The Riverside Swim Club is on the south side of the tracks on property that originally was the end of the line yard for the railroad, immediately west of the station and parking lot. This flow of children to the swim club across the Longcommon crossing is spread out in time, all-day and all-summer long, but there is never a crossing guard on duty during the summer.

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So I believe there are three different child safety issues associated with the Longcommon crossing:

1. School year normal path for grade and junior high school students living on the south side of the tracks.
2. School year doubling of the path for high school student living southwest of the crossing.
3. Summer normal path for all ages of children living north of the tracks.

I have been personally involved in two incidents that serve as examples of issues #1 and 2 above.

**Incident #1:** When we first moved to Riverside, the pedestrian tunnel was usually locked closed and there was no crossing guard at the railroad crossing, so students had to wait for trains to clear the crossing. One afternoon while I was waiting in my car on the south side of the tracks for a stopped train to clear the Longcommon grade crossing, I saw children from Hauser or Central crawl under the stopped train on their way home. I reported this in the next PTA meeting at Central and the PTA took the issue to the local police. Apparently because of that observation, the tunnel was unlocked regularly each day and a sign was placed above the tunnel entrances indicating the hours when it is open.

This is an example of the first safety issue that I identified above. This issue seems to have been largely addressed by the addition of a crossing guard at the railroad crossing during normal daily hours before classes start and after they are completed. However, there is no guard when students return home from after-school activities. And more generally, the unsafe behavior of kids around stopped trains at that crossing in this incident is a chilling example of what could happen relative to the other issues that we have identified above.

**Incident #2:** Several years later, a young girl who lived across and up the street from us and who was attending RJB high school, apparently was late for school one morning. Rather than take the proper safe long route over the Longcommon crossing and down Forest Avenue, she took the perceived short-cut through the woods and crossed the Des Plaines River using the railroad bridge. Though the visibility was clear, and the train blew its whistle and applied emergency brakes, the girl was struck and killed.

This was an example of the second issue that we identified above. As long as RJB students know that trains may occasionally block the Longcommon crossing, some students may have added incentive to use the unsafe short-cut over the railroad bridge. Railroad fences and signs are indeed in place there, but "holes happen."

**News Item:** A third related incident was reported in the March 26, 2008 issue of the local newspaper, The Landmark. It reported a 2005 event in which "Patricia Quane, 52, was struck and killed by a commuter train as she rode her bicycle across the Longcommon Road grade crossing while another commuter train was stopped on the tracks. In 2007, the BNSF settled a lawsuit filed against it by Quane's estate, paying out \$2.5 million."

**Recent Report on Tunnel Status:** The Village of Riverside has a July 2006 engineering report on the tunnel, "Riverside Pedestrian Tunnel Study." That report states:

- "Grouting and patching" is a "rehabilitation option."
- "Patching is not guaranteed to last and future maintenance of the patching will be required."
- If the rehabilitation costs less than \$500,000, new Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) ramps would not be required.
- "...abandonment of the existing tunnel without replacement creates a potential safety hazard, especially during the summer weeks when the swim club is busy."

But the report also concludes:

- "...rehabilitation of the existing tunnel is not feasible."

- Either abandoning the tunnel or replacing it with a new one (at \$3.2 to \$3.4 million) are the only feasible alternatives.

Unfortunately, the report offers no documented justification for the first conclusion: Rehabilitation is not feasible. That conclusion appears to be more of a professional opinion than the result of an analysis, such as a cost estimate of a preliminary design. Although my husband is an aerospace/mechanical/civil engineer, he is certainly not a structural engineer and cannot challenge that professional structural opinion. However, to us while the tunnel certainly is damp (indeed, wet in heavy rains), a bit shabby and clearly deteriorating, it seems to have held its original shape, to have only localized problems, and currently is in generally usable condition, as proven by its daily use. Given its approximately 90-year old age, that condition suggests that a general rehabilitation that would restore it close to its original, as-built condition might extend its useful life at least a decade or two. To average citizens like us, it hardly seems un-repairable in this day and age of new technologies and clever engineering.

**Alternate Footpath to RIB High School:** The map shows that the safe proper path to RIB over the Longcommon crossing is approximately twice the length of the “as the crow flies distance” and that both the river and the railroad form obstacles for taking that direct path. Yet students have done it and, as indicated above, been killed in the process. An alternate more direct and safe path could be built utilizing existing railroad bridge piers over the river.

The railroad bridge west of Longcommon over the Des Plaines River has extended piers in the flow of the river. All three of the mid-stream piers on the upstream side and two of the three piers on the downstream side of the bridge are extended. The north side piers are shown in an attached photo. The tops of these piers are open, well below the level of the railroad, and are apparently wide enough to support a pedestrian bridge over the river. Riverside would need to build approximately 250 yards of foot paths from Bloomingbank Road in Riverside to the footbridge and from the footbridge to First Avenue (Illinois 171). First Avenue is four-lanes wide and passes under the railroad. That underpass also has currently seldom-used sidewalks with adjacent separate underpasses below the railroad, as shown in an attached photo. Those underpass sidewalks feed north to Forest Avenue where the current signalized pedestrian crossing provides a safe crossing for virtually all Riverside students attending RIB. The signals for that intersection can just barely be seen in the distance under the railroad bridge.

**Conclusions:** The railroad is apparently arguing that the closing of the tunnel would not pose an inconvenience to the general public. Although overstated by the wording in the application to the ICC, it is hard to argue against that general point because of the relative low use of the tunnel by railroad commuters.

However, because of school in the winter and the swim club in the summer, the Longcommon railroad crossing generally poses a safety hazard for many children in the village living on both sides of the tracks. We believe that the two incidents cited above along with the year-around daily flow of frequently unescorted school-age children over the crossing establish it as an especially critical safety crossing for the public. There appear to be three different child safety issues, and each can be or has been addressed differently:

1. The normal school year grade and junior high school traffic has largely been addressed for normal hours by the posting of a crossing guard at the Longcommon crossing. However, the problem still exists for students returning home from after-school activities.
2. The incentive for high school kids to take unsafe short cuts over railroad property could be mitigated by keeping a pedestrian tunnel at Longcommon, but would be best removed by a new footbridge using existing unused railroad bridge abutment extensions over the Des Plaines River.
3. The day-long, all-summer flow of children to/from the Swim Club was highlighted by the village report as the most significant safety issue. It can be addressed only by rehabilitation of the current tunnel or construction of a new one.

Before the ICC grants approval to closing the tunnel, we would suggest the following considerations:

1. **Study the Rehabilitation of the Tunnel:** Someone could seek a creative second professional opinion from experts with specific experience in masonry structures and/or tunnels to determine how a rehabilitation would be done and what it might cost. The village report shows no evidence of having done that. This second opinion might be financed by the railroad but should probably be performed under the direction of an independent group.
2. **Alternate Route to High School:** If the tunnel is to be abandoned, one way to mitigate the safety impact for the local high school students would be an alternate more direct route to the school. In exchange for abandoning the tunnel, perhaps the railroad could provide an even safer path between our neighborhood and the high school by building a pedestrian bridge over the river, or at least granting the village permission to do it when they see fit.

Finally, if the tunnel is removed, the degradation in the safety of this crossing is likely to be cited in the legal proceedings of some future pedestrian accident if, God forbid, there were to be one. It would seem to be reasonable to ask the railroad to spend some money now, perhaps only a portion of the amount that they have already paid in the Quane case, as a gesture of a pro-active, safety design, rather than risk the lives of children and the railroad's own financial liability in the future.

Thank you for taking the time to read my concerns. We hope that you will consider the options that we have suggested above.

Sincerely,



Martine Jeanine Gary



North Pier Extensions of BNSF Bridge over Des Plaines River (looking west)



First Avenue Underpass of the BNSF (Looking North)

