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Gridlock at Tower 55 rail interchange hems in Fort Worth neighborhood

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BY GORDON DICKSON

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FORT WORTH -- Alice Cuellar has taught her children how to crawl under parked trains.

In her Rock Island/Samuels Avenue neighborhood, homes are surrounded by railroad tracks stemming from the nearby Tower 55 railroad interchange, and streets are often blocked for 30 to 45 minutes, or even hours at a time.

Children have little choice but to climb under or between the train cars, Cuellar said, if they want to get home before dark. "You have to learn to listen for the little squeaks that tell you the train is getting ready to move and you can't go under it," said Cuellar, 37, who grew up in the area and is raising a 10-year-old daughter and 4-year-old son.

It may seem like a perilous way to get to and from home, but residents in this mostly low-income neighborhood just northeast of downtown have been weaving their way across the tracks for generations, saying it is part of living in an area that is often barricaded by freight trains.

Ignored for decades, the Rock Island/Samuels Avenue area is finally getting noticed, thanks in part to a recent influx of upscale apartments, town homes and other high-rise components of the Trinity Bluff development.

Officials from two major railroads and several government agencies say they are trying to secure millions of dollars to improve railroad crossings and make walking and driving in the neighborhood safer. Federal funds have been collected in bits and pieces since 2003, but no tangible work has been completed.

These efforts have endured one bureaucratic delay after another, and the treacherous railroad crossings -- their gates often down, red lights flashing tauntingly, even when a train isn't present -- remain.

"We have to do something quickly," said state Sen. Wendy Davis, D-Fort Worth, whose district includes the area. When the streets are blocked by trains, Davis said, entire neighborhoods are cut off from ambulance service.

"Heaven forbid someone has a heart attack and medical care can't reach them in time," she said.

No stimulus funds

The latest setback occurred Feb. 17, when city and state officials were dismayed to learn that their proposal to upgrade crossings, build railroad tracks and make other improvements totaling \$93.7 million at and around Tower 55 had failed to qualify for federal stimulus funding.

Tower 55 is the X-shaped intersection of rail lines belonging to Union Pacific and BSNF Railway, just southeast of downtown Fort Worth, and south of the Rock Island/Samuels Avenue neighborhood. It's one of the worst choke points for railroad traffic in the United States.

The setback was stunning, observers said, because Recovery Act funding experts had graded the project a can't-miss candidate for federal aid because of its potential for safety benefits, job creation and interstate goods movement.

If stimulus funding had been awarded, the BNSF and Union Pacific railroads had committed to chipping in \$32 million. The railroads would have benefited from an extra 9,000 feet of railroad track and a third north-south line for BNSF at Tower 55.

The railroads haven't decided whether to go ahead and invest the \$32 million in the area, without a federal contribution.

Protecting pedestrians

At the neighborhood level, the Tower 55 project would have included construction of a pedestrian underpass at Peach Street, just east of Samuels Avenue, where students at nearby Nash Elementary can often be seen crossing the busy BNSF tracks on the way to or from school -- expressly against the wishes of their principal.

"Our concern is the children's safety," said Principal Pamela Day, who along with BNSF officials has held safety assemblies at Nash to reinforce the message to students that crossing an active railroad track is dangerous.

Day also said that bus service is offered to the tiny Greenway neighborhood north of Pharr Street, near the Trinity River, where children don't have a practical path to school when the tracks are blocked.

"But we're not here all the time. We're not here on weekends," Day said. "The parents have to do what they believe is right for the kids."

Fort Worth officials have installed surveillance cameras that take snapshots of several busy crossings in the central city, including the Peach Street crossing, and several officials say it's not uncommon to see children and other pedestrians crossing over or under parked rail cars.

Underpasses at Gounah Street and Cold Springs Road would also have been upgraded, under the Tower 55 plan. Those underpasses are meant to provide a safe passage under the tracks for pedestrians and cars. But after heavy rains they tend to collect rainwater and become impassable.

About the only change residents have noticed in recent years is that a quiet zone was created at Peach Street, near Nash Elementary, so the trains wouldn't blow their horns adjacent to one of the new high-rise developments. The developer was willing to pay the cost of quad gates, street curbs and other changes required under federal rules before a crossing can be considered a quiet zone.

But nothing has been done to protect pedestrians, said Fernando de la Rosa, who has lived on Peach Street since 1964 and raised eight children in a home that is 100 years old.

"Years ago, my wife used to get mad and go stand on the tracks. She tried to block the train," he said. "The railroad called the police. The police came, and the train still blocked the street."

State law prohibits trains from blocking a street for more than 10 minutes. But the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled several years ago that the law was unenforceable because federal law protects railroads' ability to conduct interstate commerce.

"If in fact we separated a train it would take up to an hour and 15 minutes to hook the train back up," said Joe Faust, spokesman for Fort Worth-based BNSF. "We'd have to do all the required pressure checks. What we try to do is, if in fact there's not an emergency, then we try to hold off on separating the trains. Of course, if there's an emergency we'll separate the trains as quickly as possible."

At least one crash has been reported at the BNSF crossing on Peach Street near Nash Elementary, involving a car and slow-moving train that injured four people in 1992, according to Federal Railroad Administration records. That wreck occurred when the crossing was owned by BNSF's predecessor, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway Co.

At the Union Pacific crossing on Peach Street, four incidents have been recorded dating to 1975, federal records show. The most recent crash involved a car that was struck by a train in 2005, injuring the driver, a 48-year-old female. That crossing was the scene of two other nonfatal crashes in 1977 and a crash that killed the driver of a car in 1975, when the line was owned by Missouri Pacific Railroad Co., federal records show.

Mulling their next move

Fort Worth officials had hoped the \$93.7 million stimulus proposal would be the first in a three-step process to get train congestion out of densely populated parts of Fort Worth over the next two decades.

The longer-term plan, which would cost hundreds of millions of dollars, includes digging either a north-south or east-west trench at Tower 55, so one set of railroad tracks could go under the other and trains would no longer have to wait their turn to go through the interchange. But that expensive project probably won't be funded for a decade or more and would take years of construction.

But without the short-term boost of stimulus funds, regional planners say, they're left to mull the next step.

"There is still a commitment on the region's part to do the projects," said Tom Shelton, senior planner with the North Central Texas Council of Governments. He said he plans to meet with officials from both railroads.

An official from Union Pacific, based in Omaha, Neb., said it is too soon to say whether the railroad will still spend some of its own money on the Tower 55 improvements.

"If we have to do the project on our own, one thing we'll have to do is assess the return on investment and we'll have to determine if it's a viable project," Union Pacific spokesman Clint Schelbitzki said. "Based on a 33,000-mile network that has pressing needs as well, we've got a limited capital budget."

Seven-year delay

Fort Worth officials say they're also working on a \$2.87 million proposal to close two particularly dangerous streets with crossings at the Union Pacific -- Peach Street and First Street -- and redirect Live Oak Street so that residents of Rock Island can more easily get to East Fourth Street and in and out of the neighborhood without encountering trains.

But although most of the federal funding for the project has been in place since 2003, the project has been set back by a series of delays. Hiring a consultant took longer than expected, an official said, and the usual federal paperwork requirements took longer at each step.

But the project is now 30 percent designed, said Timothy Oster, Fort Worth railroad project manager. Once the design is finished, the federal government must approve the plans and authorize construction to begin. "I know it's confusing for the citizens," Oster said. "Some of them have been waiting for this for six or seven years."

The work could begin no earlier than late 2011, he said.

Area residents say they doubt the improvements will ever be made.

Angela Castloo, president of the Rock Island/Samuels Avenue Concerned Citizens Association, knows neighbors who sometimes can't drive home after work. "They'll park on this side of the tracks, crawl over the train, go home and go to bed, get up the next day and go back over the train and go to work," she said.

At neighborhood meetings, Castloo has suggested that railroad officials visit the neighborhood and see the problems for themselves. But so far, she said, they haven't accepted her invitation.

"I don't know if they don't understand what they're doing," she said, "or don't give a rip."

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