

Grade-crossing deaths are true rail problem

By Najmedin Meshkati

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IF there is a silver lining to the deadly Metrolink crash in Chatsworth last month, it is the heightened attention to rail safety in the country, and especially in Southern California.

At the federal level, the House of Representatives passed sweeping rail-safety legislation last week that requires more rest for workers and technology that can stop a train in its tracks if it's headed for a collision. This rail-safety bill was passed by the Senate this week, and it is expected that President Bush will sign it into law soon.

At the state level, last week the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and its board, chaired by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, voted unanimously to approve a series of safety directives for Metrolink. And last Friday, the Metrolink board of directors unanimously passed a wide-ranging measure to improve safety that included adding a second engineer to some of its trains, using technologies to slow or stop trains when a warning signal is not heeded, and appointing a panel of experts to recommend safety improvements.

These are all good steps. However, it's unrealistic to hope that by showering our transit-rail-system operators with more cash and throwing high technology at their safety problems, we will be much safer.

The lion's share of the earmarked funds are for new devices that could only slow down or stop a train locally or remotely, as in the case of positive train controls. They would not have any impact whatsoever on the other major causes of deaths on the tracks on our light-rail and high-speed commuter rail systems, which are grade-crossing accidents.

According to the Federal Railroad Administration, 74 people have died in Metrolink crashes since 1999 in California, out of which 20 have been killed in grade-crossing accidents. Ninety people have died on the MTA's 22-mile L.A.-to-Long Beach Blue Line, which has had more than 821 recorded incidents between its inception in July 1990 and last July.

The above-mentioned, significantly higher-than-national average rates of accidents and fatalities along the Metrolink and MTA rail network attest to the dire state of rail safety, which is primarily caused by outdated and messy safety-related policies, procedures and practices.

One of the requisite pillars for the safety of any modern technological system's safety today is transparent, total-system-oriented accident and incident investigations, including the reporting of them and unfettered access to them by analysts or any

interested party. This pillar is either broken or missing at both Metrolink and MTA.

Other serious system-related problems that have plagued our rail safety include the tragically narrow MTA Grade Crossing Policy for Light Rail Transit and the woefully incomplete MTA Grade Crossing Preliminary Hazard Analysis, which has been used in the now-under-construction Exposition light-rail project.

Villaraigosa has already offered good and specific policy recommendations for transportation safety in a report titled "After Sprawl: Action Plans for Metropolitan Los Angeles (2003)." This report, which I had the privilege of contributing to in 2002 is, according to his official mayoral biography, "a policy blueprint for addressing the issues facing many urban centers."

What he now recommends concerning the major safety improvements of the MTA and Metrolink rail network in the Southland is precisely what he suggested previously in his report. We are simply asking him to put the money where his mouth is by helping implement his vision.

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