

## Bowen: Crossing arms, not trains, block traffic in central Pasco



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Tuesday, July 18, 2017 8:00am

Railroad traffic through Land O'Lakes and Lutz periodically interrupts cars and trucks trying to get through one of the busiest intersections in Pasco County — the crossroads of U.S. 41 and State Road 54.

It actually averages less than one freight train per day, according to CSX.

That shouldn't pose too terrible of an inconvenience for motorists.

The crossing gates stopping cars from entering the intersection are another story.

Over the past year, the CSX gates at U.S. 41 and SR 54 have malfunctioned 18 times, according to reports to the Pasco Sheriff's Office. The arms come down, but no train is in sight.

Here's a sample from the call log:

"Railroad crossing arms are down."

"Railroad crossing arms are down for 18 minutes."

"Railroad crossing arms are going up and down."

"Railroad crossing are messing up."

"Railroad arms have been down for 30 minutes."

"Railroad arms are down and bent."

It is so problematic that the Sheriff's Office, the state Department of Transportation, CSX and others met at the intersection on July 11 to try to devise a solution.

"It's a public safety hazard," Capt. Eric Seltzer said.

Indeed. The Sheriff's Office put the same sentiment in writing in a June 5 letter to CSX.

"I am sure you agree this is a serious safety concern for citizens traveling through this intersection and the surrounding area," wrote attorney Jeremiah Hawkes, chief of the sheriff's management services bureau.

Yes, we're concerned about everyone's safety, CSX said.



*OCTAVIO JONES | Times The CSX railroad gates at U.S. 41 and State Road 54 in central Pasco have malfunctioned 18 times over the past 12 months, according to Pasco Sheriff's Office reports, blocking vehicle traffic even though no train is coming.*

"The safety of drivers, pedestrians and train crews who use this crossing every day is our top priority, and our engineering and signal experts are working to understand the circumstances that exist there," CSX spokesman Rob Doolittle said via email.

But Doolittle also said the company wouldn't speculate about the source of the issue, potential solutions or a timetable for fixing it until its review is complete.

Lorraine Stevenski did her own personal review after her commute home on the afternoon of June 29. She shared the details in an email.

Stevenski, who lives in the Dupree Lakes neighborhood off Ehren Cutoff in Land O'Lakes, was headed east on SR 54 as she approached the intersection with U.S. 41.

She could see the red railroad lights flashing. The traffic was at a standstill in both directions, east and west. She waited 20 minutes, and then a sheriff's deputy arrived.

"Then the next crew arrived," Stevenski said. "The barriers were stuck closed ... once again."

She said she "waited patiently for an hour or so with no solution to the stuck barriers." People turned around on the grass median. She followed suit and headed south on Sunlake Boulevard to Lutz Lake Fern Road to N Dale Mabry Highway, only to find traffic backed up on Dale Mabry, as well.

It took her three hours to get home, she said.

"I am angry and can't believe this is allowed to happen without an easy solution. Thousands of people were inconvenienced and just plain stuck with no way out. This is very dangerous," she said.

Everyone knows that the intersection has its faults, absent haywire railroad crossing arms. Roughly 100,000 vehicles pass through the intersection each day, and growth projections call for that number to more than double over the next 25 years. Essentially, U.S. 41 is one of the gateways to southern Pasco County, a corridor that is expected to be home to an additional 130,000 people by 2040. And SR 54 is one of just two east-west arterial routes across the county.

The regular crossing gate malfunctions started after CSX replaced the railroad crossing in July 2016. According to Seltzer, CSX officials said during the July 11 meeting that sensors are being triggered inappropriately and it may be tied to the heavy-duty concrete used at the crossing during the replacement.

In other words, still more work is needed to make that intersection serviceable.

Well, add it to the list.

A short-term fix at the intersection, unrelated to the railroad troubles, is intended to extend turn lanes to allow more eastbound vehicles to pass through during each light cycle. It's one of the top priorities in the county's five-year road plan (after the Interstate 75 interchange at Overpass Road) and is expected to be completed circa 2019. The cost is listed at \$948,000.

A permanent solution such as a redesigned intersection, service roads or a \$180 million flyover are still being studied by a county task force that is scheduled to make a recommendation to the County Commission later this year.

Stevenski believes the answer is obvious.

"We need a modern intersection that does not screw up with an old-fashioned railroad crossing to rely on. What are the powers that be waiting for? Do we have funds allocated for a flyover?" she asked.

No.

The DOT was studying the idea, but slammed on the brakes amid community pushback and said it would wait until the Pasco County task force completed its work. No construction money is budgeted.

Stevenski had one more inquiry.

"How can our great town grow if we can't get past the railroad, the traffic and the blight?"

It's a legitimate question. For the time being, she'll have to wait on CSX for the answer.

