

Federal Railroad Administrator Joseph C. Szabo
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Hello, everyone. On behalf of President Obama and Secretary LaHood, it's a pleasure to join you.

I'm here this afternoon to talk about the growing role rail must play in moving both people and goods – and how we must work together to make sure our rail network continues to grow safely.

Let me say first: I know where you're coming from on a lot of these issues.

Not only as a former mayor – but as the former mayor of a town that has two major rail yards within its borders and five railroads slicing through it. And as fifth-generation railroader – one who worked out on the ground – I also understand how railroads benefit and impact local communities.

But let me now share with you my sense of where we're going.

World-leading economies do not develop by accident, nor do they evolve by resting on one's laurels. World-class economies rely on a world-class – and constantly-improving – transportation system.

And the key word here is “system.” It's not good enough to build the best roads, or the best airports, or the best railroads.

A world-leading economy requires us to build a true system – one in which each mode works in unison with the others to ensure the efficient movement of people and goods.

This is why the American Road & Transportation Builders Association, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, and the American Society of Civil Engineers all agree: The future of American transportation is multi-modal.

Today we're looking at challenges like how to move 100 million additional people and 4 billion more tons of freight over the next three decades. All while our highways and airports are stretched close to their limits – and the cost of over-reliance continues to grow.

According to last month's Texas Transportation Institute Report, the annual cost of highway congestion alone now costs our economy over \$120 billion a year, a cost of \$800 annually to each commuter.

Our airports, as well, are struggling to keep up with modern demand. Around 20 percent of all flights are delayed. And as a way of confronting high fuel prices and changing demand, airlines are now making significant cutbacks to short-haul flights to small and medium-sized cities.

In the face of these challenges, rail's efficiencies simply cannot be ignored.

With service levels targeted to the market, rail can be the most cost-effective, least oil-reliant, and most environmentally friendly mode to move people and freight.

Two railroad tracks can carry as many travelers in an hour as 16 lanes of freeway.

One double-stacked train can replace 300 trucks – saving nearly 80,000 gallons of fuel over the course of a cross-country haul.

We also can't ignore the fact that Americans' travel habits are evolving.

According to a recent study by the U.S. PIRG and Frontier Group, over the last eight years, Americans have actually driven less, while using passenger rail and public transit in record numbers.

The changes are happening fastest among young people. In an eight-year period starting in 2001, young people reduced their vehicle miles traveled by 23 percent and increased their average passenger miles traveled by rail and buses by a whopping 40 percent.

So *this* is the future we must prepare for.

And today, thanks to the President's achievable vision for rail – and thanks to record-setting federal and private-sector investments in our rail network – we are hard at work with 32 states laying this modern rail network's foundation.

2012 was one of the greatest years for rail in generations.

Most notably, it was the safest year in rail industry history.

Furthermore, Amtrak achieved record on-time performance and set an all-time ridership record – while intermodal freight traffic surged above 12 million units, very close to an industry record.

With a vote of the California General Assembly, the stage is now set for world-class, 220 MPH passenger rail service to break ground this summer.

In the Midwest, 110 MPH service – the fastest trains outside the Northeast Corridor – was introduced on the Chicago-St. Louis and Chicago-Detroit routes.

And in the next couple years, the majority of both lines will run at these sustained speeds with improved reliability, cutting trip times by close to an hour.

In order to bring world-class service to one of the world's most densely populated rail markets – the Northeast Corridor – we launched the first comprehensive planning effort since the Carter Administration.

Of the 11 construction projects completed last year, Maine's rail extension project alone – in addition to generating millions of dollars in new commercial and residential development around Brunswick's new train station – created and sustained jobs at 53 companies in 20 states.

And yet, all of this is simply a warm-up.

The \$19 billion this Administration has invested in rail since 2009 is building, improving, or creating 6,000 corridor miles, 40 stations, 75 planning studies, and 30 state rail plans or service development plans.

With our High-Speed and Intercity Passenger Rail program – through which we've been able to partner with 32 states and invest in 152 rail projects – the next two years will be our busiest construction years yet.

52 construction projects in 19 states worth \$3.6 billion in funding are either complete, under construction, or set to begin.

In the Pacific Northwest, 21 projects are moving forward that will increase roundtrips and cut trip times in a growing rail market connecting Portland and Seattle.

North Carolina has already finished three station projects, and is moving forward now with a series of construction projects along the Charlotte-Raleigh corridor that will improve speeds, safety, frequency, and reliability for passenger and freight trains.

In the Northeast Corridor, our planning effort –NEC FUTURE – will result in a 30-year rail investment plan to guide future investments.

As I mentioned, this Administration's investments have allowed us to invest in 40 stations and we are seeing several examples of a real economic development boom.

In Denver, more than two million square feet of mixed-use development is being built around Denver Union Station, spurred by its revitalization.

In Normal, Illinois, the new DOT-funded Uptown Station and the prospect of a connection to 110 MPH service incentivized private investors to spend more than \$200 million in the downtown area – including new retail shops and restaurants, a new hotel and conference center.

In Brunswick, Maine, a rail extension project restored passenger rail service to the city last year for the first time since 1959. But as soon as that project got started, millions of private dollars for commercial and residential development started pouring into its downtown.

Now, as exciting as last year's rail achievements were – we're focused on doing better.

That starts with safety.

Today – at a time of rail network expansion – the industry is safer than it has ever been. But we must always strive for continuous safety improvement.

And as proud as I am of the industry's safety record and of FRA's role in helping bring about positive changes, there is one notable exception: That's injuries and deaths due to trespassing on railroad rights-of-way – today the number one cause of railroad-related fatalities.

These preventable incidents – in addition to train-vehicle collisions at highway-rail grade crossings – represent roughly 95% of all railroad-related fatalities.

It's a sobering statistic.

So as communities look to take practical steps to mitigate some of the potentially negative effects of increased rail traffic – such as noise or blocked highway-rail crossings – it is essential not to lose a safety focus.

One practical step communities are taking is establishing quiet zones – now found in 42 states.

The practice of sounding locomotive horns and whistles as a universal safety precaution actually goes back to railroading's inception. In accordance with a congressional mandate, in 2005, FRA issued regulations requiring locomotive horns to be sounded in advance of all public highway-rail grade crossings and provided communities with the option of establishing quiet zones.

While FRA provides technical guidance and assistance on quiet zones, local government agencies are ultimately responsible for their planning, design, and implementation.

Along with the appropriate state transportation authority, communities must assess the risks of silencing the horn – then determine what additional engineering improvements will effectively mitigate these risks.

The focus is – and must always be – on what is safe.

Establishment of a quiet zone does not mean locomotive horns will never sound, but it does mean they will not routinely be used when trains are approaching crossings.

To ensure safety, locomotive engineers are still granted discretion to use the horn during emergency situations and they are required to sound the horn when railroad maintenance employees are working on the tracks.

Now, we have aided hundreds of communities in establishing quiet zones.

And we've seen communities develop many creative ways to finance these initiatives – including the use of local bonding and special assessment authority, and by partnering with residential real estate developers or the hospitality industry.

So I encourage community leaders to share best practices and learn from the successful experiences of others.

But as you seek to enhance the quality of life for your citizens, always keep a safety focus and strive to reduce highway-rail and trespasser-related fatalities.

If you look at highway-rail grade crossing accidents over a longer period of time, you will indeed see remarkable improvements.

Aided by what the FRA and our safety partner, Operation Lifesaver, call the three E's – education, enforcement, and engineering – the number of collisions at crossings fell 85 percent between 1978 and 2011.

But trespassing numbers – while they have come down slightly during this period – have held fairly constant at roughly 400 deaths per year.

So, in our mission for continuous safety improvement, we must all do better and continue to apply multiple strategies.

FRA will soon issue a final rule requiring railroads to establish emergency notification systems at every highway-rail grade crossing so that the public can more easily report malfunctioning signals or any other unsafe conditions.

We have now held two workshops on railroad trespassing, bringing together diverse groups – from the industry to law enforcement – to work together, share knowledge, and develop solutions.

We've embarked on our second demographic study of railroad trespassers – this one analyzing five years of data – to better understand who the average trespasser is and to improve our outreach efforts.

We've funded a groundbreaking Trespass Prevention Research Study in West Palm Beach, Florida, with the goal of developing a process for communities to prevent trespassing by engaging all stakeholders.

And ultimately, we're seeking to better empower communities to develop their own localized mitigation strategies.

But the lynchpin in all of this will continue to be a combination of teamwork and educational outreach.

So I call on all of you to form partnerships with FRA's regional offices and your state Operation Lifesaver chapters.

Help us spread the message within your community to never drive around lowered gates; to always expect a train; and that one text or call could wreck it all.

Make sure your residents understand that railroad trespassing endangers lives – and it is illegal.

Work with us to make railroad trespassing socially unacceptable in your communities.

As we continue to move forward in our efforts to modernize America's rail network, the role of mayors and community leaders is truly vital.

Rail re-authorization is a high priority this year and the input we receive from you informs our perspective as we provide Congress with briefings and technical assistance.

As the leaders of your communities, you know better than anyone that transportation is the lifeblood of any economy.

And that's why you also understand better than anyone else that the modern rail network we're building today is about more than trains, and tracks, and ties.

As America's rail renaissance takes hold, we're once again witnessing the transformative power of station development and access to rail service: how it creates more livable communities, enhances regional connectivity, and functions as a magnet for economic development.

And as we create these opportunities, together, we're also committing to solving the challenges of a new century – congestion, fuel utilization, air quality, and global warming – all while improving safety.

World-leading economies do not develop by accident, nor do they evolve by resting on one's laurels.

The next generation is counting on us.

And the time for action is now.

Thank you very much.