

Federal Railroad Administrator Joseph C. Szabo
Prepared Remarks
Operation Lifesaver National Leadership Conference
Albuquerque, New Mexico
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Thank you, Joyce. It's great to be here in Albuquerque with the men and women who serve on the front lines of rail grade crossing and pedestrian safety.

Let me acknowledge Joyce Rose for her tremendous leadership. And let me also acknowledge Bill Barringer, a longtime railroader who brings to OLI decades of experience with grade crossing safety.

I want to begin by stating how important our partnership with Operation Lifesaver is to FRA – how proud we are to be your partner in rail safety.

We also are proud to be a part of the new educational outreach campaign: *See Tracks. Think Train.*

Friends, it's that fundamental – *See tracks, think train* – and no one in America understands that better than Operation Lifesaver staff and volunteers.

But what's also fundamental is that – in order to achieve the next generation of rail safety in this country – rail must achieve funding parity with other surface transportation modes.

And so, while I need you to carry this message of *See Tracks, Think Train* to as many communities and classrooms as you can, I am also here today to ask you to support our vision for reauthorization.

For the very first time, it would provide rail with predictable and dedicated funding for programs that support the kind of work you do every day.

This comes at what's a critical moment for American transportation.

By 2050, our transportation network will need to move an additional 100 million people and 4 billion tons of freight. And our future economic success depends largely on whether we can move these people and goods safely, reliably, and efficiently.

But today, America is facing a massive infrastructure deficit. And the lack of balance in our transportation network is creating tremendous inefficiencies – and stunting our economic growth.

Forty-two percent of major urban highways are congested.

In 2012, nationwide, the cost of road congestion was \$121 billion – 27 billion of which was essentially the cost of trucks idling in traffic jams.

The fuel wasted in congested traffic – at \$2.9 billion gallons – was enough to fill the New Orleans Superdome four times.

Looking at aviation, airport delays and congestion in 2012 cost \$22 billion.

And as a way of confronting high fuel prices and changing demand, airlines have had to make significant cutbacks to short-haul flights to small- and medium-sized cities: that 200- to 600-mile range that happens to be the sweet spot for passenger rail.

So, in the face of these challenges, the efficiencies of rail – both freight and passenger – 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 goods.

For freight, one double-stacked intermodal unit train can carry the equivalent payload of 300 trucks – saving nearly 80,000 gallons of fuel over the course of a cross-country haul, freeing up precious highway capacity, enhancing safety, and generating significant savings in highway maintenance costs.

For passengers, two railroad tracks can carry as many people in an hour as 16 lanes of freeway, while allowing passengers a higher level of productivity and convenience.

It is a common myth that America has too much of car culture to embrace trains.

Over the past two decades, the percentage of households without a car has doubled.

And studies by the U.S. PIRG and Frontier Group have documented that since 2005 Americans have been driving less, while using passenger rail and public transit in record numbers.

Amtrak's ridership is growing faster than any other major travel mode – 40 percent growth over the past decade – with new ridership records set in 10 out of the last 11 years. And last year, Americans took a record 10.7 billion trips by public transportation, the most trips since the year President Eisenhower authorized the building of the Interstate Highway System.

Travel habits are changing particularly fast among young people. In an eight-year period starting in 2001 – young people reduced their auto vehicle miles traveled by 23 percent and increased their average passenger miles traveled by rail and bus by a whopping 40 percent.

And of course, on the freight rail side, we know the industry continues to make record re-investments in infrastructure, and is rapidly expanding its capabilities to meet the needs of our growing population and economy.

All that said, our top priority is ensuring our rail network grows safely.

Our rail network must grow safely.

Over the past decade, train accidents have declined 47 percent, highway-rail grade crossing accidents are down 35 percent, and employee fatalities have been reduced by 59 percent.

New records in safety have been achieved four of the past five years and Fiscal Year 2013 was even safer than Fiscal Year 2012 – previously our safest year on record.

Operation Lifesaver volunteers, past and present, have been key partners in this strong record of success. Between 1978 and 2011, your three E's have helped to reduce the number of collisions at crossings by 85 percent.

But we still face challenges.

Highway-rail grade crossing and trespassing accidents were up in 2013. And last year, crossing and trespassing accidents accounted for 96 percent of all rail-related fatalities.

My vision for driving the next generation of rail safety consists of three pillars:

First, continuing strong oversight and enforcement that is data-driven.

Second, advancing more pro-active safety-based programs that identify and mitigate risk well in advance of an accident.

And third, ensuring predictable and sustainable federal funding for rail, in order to improve infrastructure through capital investments and develop new safety technologies through robust research and development.

But let me talk specifically about the area of safety most important to all of you: our efforts to lower highway-rail grade crossing- and trespassing-related accidents.

We now require all railroads to post emergency notification systems at every highway-rail grade crossing. In the past, most smaller railroaders did not have these systems. Now, every railroad must have one by September 1st of next year.

We will soon publish a final rule requiring railroads to update the National Crossing Inventory at least once every three years, making it easier for states, railroads, and local governments to identify crossings that need improvements.

We have issued guidance addressing pedestrian safety at or near passenger rail stations.

We are preparing a model state action plan to help states strengthen their grade crossing safety efforts.

And, on the research side, we're studying the use of LED lighting on signs at passive crossings to see if it'll improve driver behavior.

On the trespassing side, we are testing a large-scale trespass detection and deterrent system and researching the potential of high-security fencing.

We're also working with law enforcement agencies, railroads, and transit agencies to determine the best prevention strategies, and working with you and other partners to develop new trespass prevention educational materials.

FRA is here to help you. Our grade crossing managers are excellent resources. And members of my staff, Ron Ries and Mike Grizkewitsch, are here at the conference to provide you with more details.

As I mentioned, the third pillar of our vision for reauthorization is strong capital investment: upgrading tracks, signals and grade crossing protection.

In Illinois, a fundamental part of the state's effort to raise speeds to 110 MPH throughout the Chicago-St. Louis corridor is the upgrading of 235 grade crossings. All public crossings will receive four-quad gates, with intrusion detection technology linked to the installation of Positive Train Control.

And in Vermont – where a completed project has strengthened 190 miles of track – 52 grade crossing warning devices have been upgraded.

But, ultimately, the safest crossing is simply one that doesn't exist.

In North Carolina, through our High Speed and Intercity Passenger Rail program, 50 crossings between Raleigh and Charlotte will be closed – effectively sealing the corridor – with underpasses and overpasses strategically located to improve traffic flow and enhance safety for vehicles, pedestrians, and rail operations.

This is the type of work we will continue if Congress will support the Grow America Act.

It will provide \$19 billion for rail programs over four years, investing in both a Current Passenger Rail Service Program as well as a Rail Service Improvement Program.

The Current Passenger Rail Service Program will fully fund Amtrak, and ensure a state of good repair system-wide.

And the Rail Service Improvement Program, in addition to investing in new high-performance passenger rail markets, would also provide competitive grants for projects that mitigate the negative impacts of railroad operations in local communities.

This includes rail-line relocation and improvement projects, and efforts to improve safety at highway-rail grade crossings.

Projects that upgrade short line railroad infrastructure – critical rail integrity and bridge upgrades – would also be eligible.

And, we'd be able to assist local governments in improving their coordination with railroads on operations and safety issues.

Since the Highway Trust Fund was first established more than half a century ago, Congress has recognized that, as America grows, so must our investment in transportation.

In almost every case, each surface reauthorization law has increased investment by 40 percent compared to the previous law.

And Congress has passed them with broad, bipartisan majorities in both houses.

What the Grow America Act proposes is not only to increase investment, but to rethink how we plan for, how we invest in, and how we build a 21st century transportation system – including rail.

And as rail traffic grows in this country – as rail plays a larger role in moving people and freight – so does the risk of driving around a lowered gate or taking a shortcut across tracks.

That is why we are relying on you more than ever. That is why your message – *See Tracks. Think Train* – and the great work you do is as important as it has ever been.

The Grow America Act will help us double-down on our efforts to lower grade crossing and trespassing accidents, helping us lead the next generation of rail safety.

And it will change history by putting rail on par with other forms of transportation.

It is an honor to be here with all of you today.

Thanks for listening.