

'Risky Business' on the Rails

Locomotive vs. Van Collision Highlights Death Risk, Fines for Crossing Violations

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Text and Photography

By Ed Scannell

(October 27) A staged collision between a freight locomotive and a passenger van carrying crash test dummies provided graphic testimony, today, about the risks motorists take when they ignore warnings at railroad crossings.

The spectacular crash also served as a warning to motorists who cross railroad tracks illegally - and live to tell the story - that the cost of such a risky move will soon increase.



California Assembly Bill 923, sponsored by the MTA and SCRRA and recently signed into law by Governor Davis, will increase the penalty for motorist violations at railroad crossings from \$104 to \$271 beginning Jan. 1, 2000. A third violation could cost offenders as much as \$500. These are the same fines paid by motorists who violate laws regarding

freeway carpool lanes or who run red lights on streets.

"The MTA and other rail transit agencies in California have gone to great lengths to prevent accidents and injuries, yet some people persist in ignoring the warnings at railroad crossings," said CEO Julian Burke. "We are hopeful that the prospect of higher fines will cause potential violators to think twice about risking their own lives and the lives of others."

Fines collected under AB 923 will help support a variety of safety measures including driver education, the placement of barricades and gates, and the installation of additional surveillance cameras that identify violators and provide evidence needed to cite them. The MTA currently employs 10 surveillance cameras on a rotating basis at 17 of the 100 grade crossings on the Metro Blue Line.

In addition to the use of gates, flashing lights and other safety equipment, the MTA conducts an ongoing public educational outreach to residents, businesses, community groups, senior centers, schools and safety fairs. A team of eight Sheriff's Department motorcycle deputies was formed in recent months to enforce the vehicle code at all of the crossings, as well as to enforce the laws prohibiting jaywalking and trespassing by pedestrians.

"We feel obliged to educate people and to discourage them from taking risks," said Paul J. Lennon, MTA managing director of safety and security. "Grade crossing safety on the Metro Blue Line is just as important to us as safely transporting passengers."

Today's collision was staged by a Hollywood stunt team along North Main Street just north of downtown Los Angeles.

[Back to MTA Report](#)