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What's Being Done About Long Waits At Train Crossings?



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The Gulf Coast Rail District is looking at a project designed to eliminate long delays along a busy railroad track. The project would create an entire stretch where drivers wouldn't have to sit and

wait for trains to pass on the east side.

It's a common occurrence for drivers in Houston's East End.

The lights flash, the crossing arms come down.

And it's time to wait for the train.

Julie Halsey sees it a lot. She's the community director for the Marquis Lofts on Runnels Street. They're next to the busy section of track known as the **West Belt Subdivision**.

"You have new customers that are coming in that are looking to potentially move into the East End, and you spend an enormous amount of time with them the community and educating them about the east end of downtown. And they go to leave and there's the train. And immediately they're like, 'No, I wouldn't put up with this for a second.'"

The West Belt Subdivision is a double-track freight line that runs through the East End to Lyons Street, east of downtown.

The corridor has numerous side tracks and rail yards, and it stays busy. The **Gulf Coast Rail District** says 60 to 70 trains a day travel some portion of the tracks, and sometimes those trains come to a complete stop.

"I've seen emergency vehicles turn around and try to find an alternative pathway."

Diane Schenke is president of the **Greater East End Management District**.

"One of the dangers is kids will try to crawl through the stopped railroad cars, and then of course the railroad cars will start up without any warning and it can cause serious injury or even death to the kids."

But some of those hazards could become a thing of the past, as the Rail District moves ahead with recommendations from a **2007 TxDOT study**.

With rail traffic expected to grow in the years to come, plans call for a six-mile sealed rail corridor that would eliminate all of the at-grade crossings, and create a quiet zone where trains wouldn't blow their horns.

The study looked at 12 crossings. Some would be closed. Other would get a grade separation, with traffic going under or over the tracks.

Rail District Board Chairman Bert Keller says timing couldn't be more critical, since east Houston is getting about a half million new feet of office space, along with thousands of new apartments.

"When we do the grade separation those people will not have to wait at those crossings, and then also those cars won't be sitting there stagnant with their exhaust, just sitting still."

The cost of the entire project is estimated at around \$110 million.

Rail District Executive Director Maureen Crocker says the next step is engineering and environmental assessment.

"That should be over \$6 million dollars, and that funding has been secured. What we're looking for is the railroads to provide the local cost share, just over a million dollars, to complete that package."

Officials say the assessment should take a couple of years. Then they'll have to secure the funding to actually do the work. Once that happens, they're hoping those busy crossings get a lot more quiet.

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