

State, KCS commit \$16 million to crossing improvements
Joint agreement to bring \$16M in improvements.

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Louisiana's consistently high ranking for railroad crossing crashes and fatalities is being met with a \$16 million effort to improve railroad safety in the Shreveport region and other areas over the next five years.

Improvements to 300 public railroad crossings will be made under a corridor project agreement between Kansas City Southern Railway Co. and the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development, the parent company Kansas City Southern said Tuesday.

Planning and scheduling of the work is under way, said KCS spokeswoman Doniele Kane in Kansas City, Mo. A list of the crossings was not available Tuesday, according to DOTD.

Louisiana typically ranks in the top five of railroad crossing crashes and fatalities nationwide. In 2005, the state saw 18 deaths related to crashes involving trains, according to the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission.

The last fatality in Caddo Parish happened in March 2005 when a car-train crash in Oil City killed a Texas man, an Arkansas woman and her 6-month-old daughter.

"This project is significant because it accelerates the process of improving public safety in Louisiana," said Allen Pepper, KCS director of public safety.

After completion of the project, nearly half of the nongated crossings in the area will have warning level upgrades, from crossbucks to flashers and gates. The remaining crossings will get new crossbucks with a yield or stop sign.

The corridor project agreement covers more than 375 miles of track from Shreveport east to Mississippi along the Interstate 20 corridor, south to DeQuincy along U.S. 171 and north to the Arkansas line along La. Highway 1.

KSC Railway will invest up to \$5 million and DOTD up to \$11.6 million over the five years.

"By combining available state and federal resources with railroad resources, we are making important strides toward enhancing safety throughout the state," said Bill Shrewsbury, DOTD highway rail safety engineer.

The agreement is the result of Louisiana House Concurrent Resolution No. 185, which encourages DOTD to negotiate agreements with Louisiana railroad companies to seek financial contributions for the installation of traffic control devices.

"This is the first step in trying to close some crossings and upgrade other crossings," said Carmack Blackmon, chief lobbyist for the Louisiana State Railroad Association. "The amount of trains and freight being moved has grown leaps and bounds."

Louisiana has six major railroad companies and Amtrak running trains on tracks that crisscross the state. State highways and local roads cross the tracks 3,017 times. Statewide, a train crosses a road about every 10 seconds.

State records in 2005 showed that 44 percent of the state's crossings had warning devices and arms. However, state officials have said motorists don't always pay attention to the warnings and try to beat trains.

Blackmon said the improvements "will make a difference -- if (motorists) comply with the law."