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REMARKS BY U.S. SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION JOHN A. VOLPE TO THE NATIONAL GRADE CROSSING CONFERENCE, OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY, COLUMBUS, OHIO, TUESDAY, AUGUST 29, 1972

The facts of the railroad-highway grade crossing challenge are stark and dramatic. There are more than 220,000 public grade crossings in the United States today. That's where some 12,000 motor vehicle-train collisions occur annually. These collisions -- averaging about 32 a day -- result in some 1,500 deaths and 7,000 injuries. This must stop.

I am sure all of us have the same reaction when we hear of an accident between a motor vehicle and a railroad train, "Why, in this period of such advanced technology must such primitive kinds of accidents occur?" Like you, I have asked myself that question many times, and, frankly, gentlemen, I am not satisfied with the answers I get. There is no excuse for these kind of accidents. They must not be allowed to continue. And they will not continue.

The technological answers to the grade crossing problem may not seem complex, but technology is only part of the answer. The obvious solution is universal grade separation, but the cost for this would be about \$100 billion -- or about four times the net total investment of all our railroads combined. So the sheer size of the problem is our first obstacle.

Another complexity is the number of people and organizations involved. The railroads, the highway system and the millions of drivers are all independent of each other. Moreover, among the public agencies involved there are various degrees of authority and responsibility. No one person or group has complete responsibility.

Another important fact is the very large number of crossings which carry low volumes of both vehicular traffic and railroad movements. More than 70,000 of these -- almost one third of the total -- have two or less train movements per day and vehicular traffic of 500 or less per day.

Very few of these lightly used crossings have sufficient accident potential to economically justify the cost of train-activated crossing protection. In only the most unusual circumstances would they warrant the expenditure required for grade separation.

So obviously, there is more than one facet to this problem.

In 1970, the Congress directed our Department to prepare a comprehensive report on the grade crossing problem. The first part of this report was sent to the Congress last year. I am happy to report the second part was submitted a little more than a week ago.

The two-part report is the culmination of an intensive two-year study carried out jointly by the staffs of the Federal Highway and the Federal Railroad Administrations, with assistance from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the American Association of State Highway Officials, the Association of American Railroads, and the American Short Line Railroad Association, and all to the State Highway Departments. All parties are to be congratulated for a fine job.

The new Part Two which we just sent to the Congress calls for a substantial increase -- during the next 10 years -- in grade crossing protection. At the same time it recommends continuance of the existing program of eliminating potential crossings by building grade separations and relocating and consolidating railroads and highways.

We began our study with an economic analysis of the benefits to be secured by improvements such as flashing lights, automatic gates and the total benefits from grade separating structures. It was soon apparent that improved protection at many crossings will give a greater pay-off than grade separation at a lesser number.

The program we are recommending, consequently, calls for protection at 30,000 grade crossings at a cost of about \$750 million. We envision that this program would run for 10 years upgrading some 3,000 crossings a year at an annual cost of \$75 million.

This would be about three times the current rate of installation. The completion of this program would eliminate nearly 4,000 motor vehicle-train collisions annually and would result in saving 500 lives a year. We believe this is a most worthwhile program.

I want to point out that about half the motor vehicle-train collisions now occur at crossings off the Federal Highway System -- crossings that are not eligible for Federal funds. That's why we recommend that Federal assistance be expanded to improve safety at all locations.

We believe our report provides the Congress with sufficient information, and we are optimistic that the members will approve our program and give us the go ahead.

This report to Congress is, of course, but one element in our grade crossing program. We are regularly spending about \$100 million a year separating highway and railroad traffic on new construction on the Interstate System. This is an on-going part of the interstate building program.

This past year, however, we launched a new attack. We secured a special release of Federal Aid Highway Funds for the purpose of financing grade crossing safety projects on highways other than those on the Interstate System. I then wrote to each Governor telling him about the new funds and asking his cooperation, and the response was extremely gratifying. Our original plan was to set aside \$100 million. I am very happy to announce that we passed that goal and obligated a total of \$112 for grade crossing safety projects in the Fiscal Year ending June 30 of this year.

This special project comes on top of two on-going grade crossing demonstration projects. These programs are designed to show the states and municipalities what can be done.

The first project aims for elimination of all public grade crossings along the route of the high speed rail line between Washington, D. C. and Boston, Massachusetts. We are adapting to railroads the design concept of no intersections that is part of our Interstate Freeways System. We shall eliminate 50 public road crossings, and the end result will be the Nation's first rail freeway.

In Greenwood, South Carolina, we are showing how railroads can be integrated into an urban environment to the advantages of all parties. This project, involving two railroads will relocate and consolidate several miles of track. At the same time, several grade crossings will be protected and others will be eliminated. In all, eight miles of track will be eliminated. The net results will be, (1) An improvement in the appearance and cohesiveness of the downtown area; (2) Increased highway safety and mobility and; (3) Improved railroad operations.

We are also carefully examining every phase of the grade crossing safety effort to determine where new technology can be helpful and we are conducting a vigorous research and development program to improve that technology. We have introduced several technological innovations into train-activated crossing protection devices. We are also seeking ways to improve the passive warning devices -- both signs and pavement markings -- and we are working on methods for making trains more visible.

We have zeroed in on the driver, too, to learn what human factors are involved in improving grade crossing safety.

One of our major studies is a complete inventory of all grade crossings in the country. We are convinced that this is the only feasible way for a sound understanding of all the problems. This inventory moreover, will also help us direct available resources to suitable improvement techniques.

All these approaches, however, will not solve the problem unless we can add one more very important ingredient. And we are counting on this Conference to help us supply this catalyst.

I spoke earlier of the many organizations, the many individuals, and the many authorities that are involved in and have responsibility for improving grade crossing safety. To move forward on this problem, it is vitally necessary that all parties concerned are aware of the seriousness of the problem and are willing to volunteer resources to help meet it. We shall avail ourselves nothing if our only contribution is to assign blame or fix responsibility. And so I ask all of you here to work with us at this Conference and then, on your return home, spread the word to your organizations.

Now I am optimistic we shall get a strong Federal program underway. When President Nixon first gave me my marching orders, he told me to put safety at the top of my list. He was not satisfied that safety was receiving enough attention. Because of the President's insistence I set up the new National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and made it part of my own staff.

In addition, we are getting tremendous cooperation from our Bureau of Motor Carrier Safety. They recognize full well that rail crossings are not exclusively a rail problem and they make sure that the Nation's professional truck and bus drivers treat grade crossings with the highest respect and regard.

And at the policy level, we now have an Assistant Secretary for Safety and Consumer Affairs -- who has an overview of the entire transportation safety spectrum. So as you can see, the Department of Transportation is most definitely in a position to play a meaningful role in meeting this challenge. I do not expect the President's interest to slacken and I am convinced he will make a strong case for our new grade crossing program with the next Congress and I am convinced President Nixon will be successful. Then we shall need your help. By ourselves, we in Washington cannot be fully effective. But working together with you -- with local authorities and local organizations -- we can win and win big. I remind you, gentlemen, the purpose of our efforts is to save lives. Can there be anything more important?

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