

RIVERSIDE COUNTY: Officials updating overpass priorities

Officials plan to update a grade separation priority list to get efforts like the recently completed Magnolia Ave. off the ground



TERRY PIERSON/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Senator Barbara Boxer in January used the newly-completed Magnolia Avenue Grade Separation to advocate rebuilding the nation's transportation system. The crossing eliminated one of the region's worst traffic tie-ups related to trains passing through the area.

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Published: 12 March 2012 09:27

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Day Nguyen's lunchtime trips to Riverside Plaza are a lot easier now that an underpass along Magnolia Avenue means she doesn't wait for trains, she said.

A Text Size  

"I hated it," said Nguyen, 20. "I'd be sitting there for, like, 10 minutes watching the train go by ... and then the lights to change."

View [Priority grade separations in Riverside County](#) in a larger map

Train delays are a nuisance local transportation planners are trying to eliminate across most of the western of Riverside County. Four overpass or underpass projects are scheduled to start this year, followed by another five in 2013.

And then there are another 46 to go, officials said.

On Wednesday, the Riverside County Transportation Commission will weigh which ones should be fixed to provide free-flowing streets to cars and trucks.

The list won't determine what gets built first — that's ultimately up to city, state and federal officials who control the money — but it does give planners a starting point to seek money and use it where it might do the most good for regional transportation.

Spruce Street, near the 60/91/215 interchange in Riverside, is the most-needed crossing, according to an analysis prepared for the commission and released last month. McKinley Street in Corona, Chicago Avenue in Riverside, Hargrave Street in Banning and Third Street in Riverside round out the top five.

The commission last updated the grade separation priority list four years ago, so it was time for a review, said Tanya Love, goods movement manager for the commission.

The economic recession, changes in trade and growth patterns and the completion of a handful of overpasses and underpasses warranted the update, she said.

Six of the area's 61 major crossings have either closed or been replaced with an overpass or underpass in the past four years.

New overpasses at Columbia and Magnolia avenues in Riverside, for example, have eased traffic along popular local routes.

"We've accomplished quite a bit," said John Standiford, deputy director of the transportation commission. "Given the challenges of the past few years, I would say progress has been made."

Nine more crossings are scheduled for construction by next year as part of a statewide plan to upgrade transportation corridors.

Eliminating idling cars at rail crossings will reduce pollution in the region and help local drivers get around long waits. Proponents also say emergency response times will improve in some areas where trains delay ambulances and police.

With the priority list and supporting studies, officials can make their case to lawmakers in Sacramento and Washington to help fund many of the grade separations, Love said. Railroads contribute 5 percent or 10 percent of the cost of the overpass or underpass, according to state and federal requirements.

Based on estimates between 2006 and 2010, the top 10 grade separations in the county will cost about \$10 million.

Building them won't happen in order, Love said.

"Even if your project is number one on the list, that doesn't necessarily mean your project is the first to get funded," she said.

A city could focus on crossings and use transportation money to build an overpass, as Riverside has. But it may have other priorities, such as road widening, the crossing might get built later than some lower on the list.

Some of the high-priority crossings also are more costly, Love said, and officials might choose to build cheaper ones when money is available.

In setting priorities, factors such as safety, traffic delay and air quality are compared, based on what the county experienced in 2010 and what it is expected in 2035. By then, the volume of goods flowing into Southern California ports is predicted to triple, dramatically increasing the number of trains coming through the Inland Empire each day.

Riverside County drivers already spend a combined 600 hours each day waiting at railroad crossings. So far, predictions for 2035 calculate that the delays in Corona and Riverside will increase six-fold without more overpasses and underpasses.

Unlike previous versions, the new priority list considers a project's readiness and whether it is isolated from other crossings. In the San Geronimo Pass and Coachella Valley, some overpasses and underpasses might not handle huge traffic volumes but they are the only crossings for miles and delays can be exacerbated by a lack of alternative routes.

Ready for Work

Officials point to the progress of the past five years as proof that transportation and municipal officials have cooperated in successfully snagging state and federal dollars for grade separations.

But building the overpasses has been a slow process. When more than \$150 million in state bonds were awarded to a dozen grade separations, officials predicted construction would start on all of them by January 2012. Of those 12, two — Columbia and Magnolia in Riverside — are finished and no work has begun on the other 10.

Construction of the Columbia overpass started relatively on time but took six months longer than expected. Magnolia was completed last month, nearly 18 months later than predicted when it received \$20 million from voter-approved Prop. 1B transportation bond program.

Though delayed, both projects stayed true to their original budgets, according to city and state reports.

The sluggish economy, delays in securing properties needed for the projects and heavy rains in December 2010 were blamed for some of the setbacks. Riverside officials delayed the Third Street crossing because of financial constraints, removing it from the Prop. 1B list.

Overpasses at Iowa Avenue in Riverside and Auto Center Drive in Corona are scheduled to start construction next month. Crossings at Streeter Avenue and Riverside Avenue are scheduled to be under way before the end of the year, months later than initially expected.

Love said officials struggled to secure the last bits of funding for many of the overpasses, especially as city budgets tightened.

"We have been smoothing those issues out," she said.

With five of the remaining state bond projects required to start construction by 2013, officials said they realize they have to get many projects moving quickly.

But Love said she is confident.

"There are some funding shortfalls and we're hoping to get past them," she said. "We're still moving ahead."