Drivers, pedestrians urged to use caution when traveling near trains

June is Rail Crossing Safety Awareness Month. It serves to remind us that risky behavior near railroad tracks can be a matter of life and death. Already this year, there have been 25 highway-rail grade collisions in Minnesota. In February, drivers in Elk River went around lowered gates at two different crossings and their vehicles were hit by trains. Fortunately, only property was damaged. However, too many people have suffered serious injuries or death at railroad crossings in the state.

From the railroads, I've learned of multiple “near misses” involving people risking their lives going around lowered gates and past flashing lights. The risk-takers avoided a collision with a train by mere seconds. Too often, this dangerous behavior leads to tragic results.

Last year in Minnesota, six people died and 26 were injured at highway-rail grade crossings when their vehicle collided with a train. Another five people died and five were seriously injured while trespassing on railroad property. Nationally, deaths and injuries at railroad crossings have been increasing.

The statistics are alarming and most of these crashes are preventable. Driver inattention and impatience most commonly contribute to car and train crashes. No one should ever drive or walk around lowered gates. When signal lights are flashing, treat them like a stop sign and proceed only when it’s safe. Drivers and pedestrians must yield the right of way to trains at highway-rail crossings. Never race to beat the train; it is illegal, and statistics show you will lose.

At 55 miles per hour, it takes a fully-loaded freight train more than a mile to come to a full stop. A light rail train needs 600 feet to stop. By the time the train engineer sees a vehicle or pedestrian on the tracks, it’s often too late. Pedestrians should only cross railroad tracks at marked pedestrian crossings.

At MnDOT, we strive to reduce highway-railroad grade crossing crashes to save lives. We’ve installed active warning devices at more than 1,500 of the approximately 4,200 public railroad-highway crossings in the state. We work with other organizations, such as Minnesota Operation Lifesaver, which educates the public on how to avoid crashes, injuries and deaths at rail crossings and on railroad property.

This summer, MnDOT is investing $7.9 million in gates and upgraded crossing signal equipment at 40 locations throughout the state. This work will provide safer intersections. However, to completely stop crashes from occurring at railroad crossings, we need the public’s help.

Drivers and walkers have to pay attention to the crossing and not take unnecessary risks. Betting on beating a moving train carries a very high price if you lose, perhaps the price of a lifetime.

Charlie Zelle, Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Transportation