

Chapter 16: Rail Systems

Introduction

Rail service in the Bend Metropolitan planning area serves an important role to the regional transportation system moving freight north and south through the study area and serving regional connections within the State of Oregon and beyond.

Between 2007 and 2009, ODOT funded and a multi-agency team developed the *Report on Central Oregon Rail Planning*. The report addresses various rail related safety, congestion, freight mobility, and economic development issues for Central Oregon. The report contains findings and recommendations including rail grade separations of Cooley and Reed Market Roads. The findings and recommendations from the report will be incorporated in Stage 2 of the MTP update process.

Facilities

Freight Rail

Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) and Union Pacific (UP) currently operate trains through the Bend Metropolitan planning area. The rail track, owned by BNSF, runs parallel to Highway 97 at the north city limits before veering east just south of Colorado Avenue towards the industrial zone. The rail track is regulated under the Federal Railroad Administrations (FRA) class 2, 3 and 4 track standards; there are no weight or dimensional restrictions for freight movements through the study area. As a result, rail can handle much heavier loads as well as longer loads than those normally permitted on highways. A modern rail car can handle the same cargo that would require three to four semi-trucks to handle.

BNSF and UP combined for an estimated 13 million gross ton miles being transported through the study area in 2002¹. In 2005, BNSF was operating approximately 12-15 trains per 24 hours through the study area, while UP was operating one train daily in each direction. Additionally, BNSF operates a switch engine which transports freight to and from local businesses within the study area. The majority of freight being transported through the study area consists of various forest products, cement, diesel fuel, liquefied petroleum gas, wallboard, and other construction supplies.

Passenger Rail

There is currently no passenger rail service in the Bend Metropolitan planning area. The nearest connection to passenger rail service in central Oregon is in the town of Chemult, which is located about 70 miles south of Bend. The feasibility of extending AMTRAK service to the Bend area was analyzed during the development of the 1992 Oregon Rail Passenger Policy Plan. The study concluded it would be impractical to

¹ Email from Bob Melbo of ODOT Rail Division to Tyler Deke of Bend MPO, January, 2006.

provide passenger service to Bend. In 2000, the state funded two “throughway” bus connections with AMTRAK that pass through Bend. One travels from Portland to Boise, Idaho and the other connects the Chemult rail station with the Bend area. The Oregon Rail Plan² does not currently identify any future plans for passenger rail service serving the Bend Metropolitan planning area.

At-Grade Rail Crossings

The majority of the rail crossings within the study area are at grade. There are seventeen total crossings over the freight rail line traversing the study area. Eleven of the crossings are at grade and utilize active traffic control devices; the remaining crossings are over grade or under grade. The rail crossings are shown in Figure 1-12 (from the existing conditions chapter).

Forecasts and Future Needs

Overall, rail freight in Oregon is projected to be the second fastest growing mode of transportation behind vehicle travel. Oregon’s freight rail traffic totaled 63.5 million tons, handled to, from, within and through the state in 1999. Rail freight volumes, as well as truck freight volumes are forecast to double by 2020 in the state of Oregon and nationally. No regional rail forecasts for the Bend Metropolitan planning area are available.

Throughout the 20-year planning period, the railroad line through the study area will continue to haul freight. The existing railroad switching yard depot, weigh station and sidings are expected to remain unchanged and there are no planned changes to the existing pattern of short spur rail lines that serve local freight rail users.

The Bend Transportation System Plan includes two future rail crossings in the 20 year planning time frame. One future crossing is an eastward extension of Murphy Road (a collector) to 15th Street. This new road/railroad crossing will be grade separated. Another proposed railroad under crossing is proposed at Hawthorne Avenue. A detailed analysis (for the future need of the Hawthorne connection) should be evaluated when it is necessary to improve east-west capacity in the downtown to Third Street.

Historically, train delays at road/railroad crossings have not been a major traffic problem in the Bend Metropolitan planning area, with the exception of the Reed Market Road crossing. As a result of the *Reed Market Corridor Study*, it is recommended to grade separate the rail crossing at Reed Market Road from Paiute Way to 9th Street. As part of this grade separation, consideration will have to be given to improving the direct connection for motor vehicles between 9th Street (to the north) and American Lane (to the south). This may include a system of frontage roads.

² *Oregon Rail Plan* Oregon Department of Transportation, 2001. Accessed online: <http://statelands.dsl.state.or.us/ODOT/RAIL/docs/railplan01.pdf#search=%22oregon%20rail%20plan%22>

As traffic volumes increase, other train crossings may contribute to increased traffic interruptions, specifically on arterial roadways. Potential solutions include coordination with railroad authorities to minimize crossings during peak driving periods or grade separation.

Policies

The region has specific goals and policies outlined within the local transportation plans that are specifically related to rail service and were developed to help guide the future of the regional railroads. The following policies are primarily related to safety and expanded usage of the existing rail lines and are applicable to the Bend Metropolitan planning area.

1. Maintain the existing levels of freight rail activity throughout the Bend Metropolitan planning area while also encouraging expanded usage by commercial and industrial companies.
2. Increase the safety of existing at-grade crossings and work towards the eventual replacement of priority at-grade crossings with grade-separated crossings.
3. Work cooperatively with affected local jurisdictions and railroad operators to reduce land use conflicts and increase safety at all at-grade crossings;
4. Encourage efforts to improve the condition of rail lines throughout the Bend Metropolitan planning area in order to retain the effectiveness and competitiveness;
5. For rail lines being considered for abandonment, work cooperatively with the applicable parties to evaluate opportunities for converting the rail line to multi-purpose trail use. If the rail line is converted to multi-purpose trail use, the trails should be incorporated into the applicable local trail system plans;
6. Work cooperatively with the railroad operator to determine where, if possible, railroad right-of-ways could be used as trail corridors. Provided local joint-use agreements can be reached with the railroad operator, work with local jurisdictions to evaluate the entire Rails to Trails Corridor in light of opportunities to augment the local primary trail system. If trails are identified and developed, the trails should be incorporated into the applicable local trail system plans;
7. Work cooperatively with affected local jurisdictions, businesses and railroad operators to protect all rail spurs that currently serve businesses or have the potential to serve freight rail uses from abandonment or incompatible zoning; and
8. Work cooperatively with the railroad operator to develop and implement a plan for train scheduling to ensure that the current needs of the transportation system in the study area are minimally affected.
9. Work cooperatively with the railroad operator to evaluate opportunities for minimizing noise impacts associated with rail operations.