

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: December 27, 1978

Forwarded to:

Honorable Reubin Askew  
Governor of Florida  
State Capitol  
Tallahassee, Florida 32304

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

H-78-77

At 8:25 p.m. on October 2, 1977, westbound Amtrak passenger train No. 57 struck a northbound pickup truck at a railroad/highway grade crossing in Plant City, Florida. The crossing was equipped with red flashing signals, which were operating when the truck and train collided. The train was traveling at 70 mph in a 79-mph speed zone; the pickup truck was traveling at 50 mph in a 45-mph speed zone. The 10 occupants of the pickup truck died in the crash. None of the traincrew or its 30 passengers was injured. 1/

On the northbound approach to the Turkey Creek Road crossing, the westbound train was not visible to the driver until she passed a stand of trees 400 feet south of the grade crossing. At that point the train was 559 feet from the crossing. There was no way the train could stop. The pickup truck could have stopped after the train became visible, but there was no time available for hesitation on the part of the driver.

There were no railroad warning markings on either approach to the crossing on Turkey Creek Road, a nonfederal-aid highway. The advance railroad warning sign for northbound traffic was installed 202 feet south of the crossing instead of the 250 feet required in an urban environment by the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices.

An autopsy of the driver of the pickup truck disclosed a 0.14-percent blood alcohol level. The Florida traffic code states that blood alcohol level of 0.10 percent or more is prima facie evidence of driving while under the influence of alcohol.

1/ For more detailed information read: "Railroad/Highway Accident Report: Seaboard Coast Line/Amtrak Passenger Train/Pickup Truck Collision, Plant City, Florida, October 2, 1977" (NTSB-RHR-78-2).

Available evidence indicates that the truckdriver frequently consumed considerable amounts of alcohol. However, she had no records of alcohol-related offenses and was not known to the local or State law enforcement agency. It is not known if she made a practice of driving after drinking alcoholic beverages.

The Safety Board could find no evidence of an active enforcement program in the area of Dade City and Plant City related to violations of the flashing railroad crossing warning light signals. Florida traffic records indicate that alcohol was involved in about 50 percent of the traffic fatalities in Florida and about 40 percent of the alcohol-involved drivers in fatal accidents had blood alcohol levels of .20 percent or higher.

Hillsborough County, Florida, had an Alcohol Safety Action Program (ASAP) from 1972 to 1976, which ended when Federal funds expired. The final report on the program concluded that "after five years of ASAP countermeasure activity there has been a significant decline in the proportions of drunk drivers on the road and the decline had not had a noticeable effect on A/R (alcohol related) accidents." 2/

Recently, the Florida Department of Public Safety has increased its enforcement personnel and is shifting selective enforcement emphasis to the apprehension of alcohol-involved drivers. The area selected does not include the vicinity where the accident occurred. The Safety Board will also be watching with interest the results of the Driver/Occupant Task Force which has been established as an advisory arm of the Florida Bureau of Highway Safety. We understand that alcohol and the driver is of major concern to the Task Force.

The Safety Board supports Operation Lifesaver, a program that incorporates the three primary elements of traffic safety -- education, engineering, and enforcement. Following this accident, the Florida Highway Patrol, in cooperation with Amtrak, mounted a special effort to present the concepts of Operation Lifesaver to the public in the vicinity of the Jacksonville/Tampa high-speed rail corridor.

These programs are admirable and the State of Florida should be complimented for its innovation. However, these programs require long-term support from the top level of the State down to the operating level, and we urge Florida to forcefully encourage and support the widespread conduct of Operation Lifesaver, which should include strong selective enforcement goals for grade crossing safety.

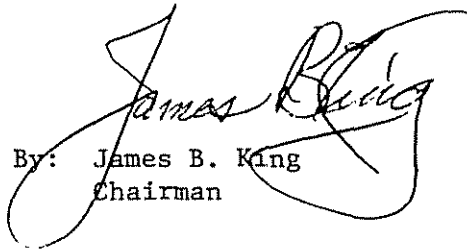
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2/ Westra and Reis, "An Analysis of Total Project Impact (Tampa ASAP) 1976 - Final Report," University of Southern Florida, Tampa, Florida (DOT HS-062-1-080).

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the State of Florida:

Encourage State-level participation in and high-priority implementation of effective and continuous Statewide Operation Lifesaver railroad/highway grade crossing and selective law enforcement programs. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-78-77)

KING, Chairman, DRIVER, Vice Chairman, McADAMS and HOGUE, Members, concurred in the above recommendation.

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James B. King', is written over the typed name and title.

By: James B. King  
Chairman

