

Proposed railroad line plans indicates partners planning increased use

Written by Marty Randall
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Environmental effects of a proposed plan by owners of the Louisville and Indianapolis (L&I) Railroad and CSX Transportation (CSXT) Inc. are currently being studied by the Surface Transportation Board (STB) of the Office of Environmental Analysis in Washington D.C.

The 106.5-mile rail line between Indianapolis and Louisville crosses Scott County and splits the communities of Austin and Scottsburg.

The Surface Transportation Board is analyzing the environmental impact of the L&I and CSXT plan to upgrade the tracks so that heavier and larger cargo loads can be carried on a more frequent basis than the two to seven trains that daily use the tracks now. Current trains are not only L&I conveyances but also CSXT trains.

The partners have agreed to a \$10 million payment to L&I for an operating easement. This easement would allow more CSXT trains to use the L&I tracks. Additionally, CSXT would pay between \$70 to \$90 million to improve the rail line to allow CSXT to move longer and heavier railcars more quickly.

According to figures released by the STB, railcars would measure up to a total of 7,500 feet pulled by a locomotive. That's an increase from the present 5,100 feet. Additionally, railcars would carry 286,000 pounds of freight, compared with the present 263,000 pounds allowed.

If granted, the easement would also allow trains to go faster. Presently, trains are limited to from 15 mph to 25 mph. Under the new easement, trains could travel up to 49 mph.

"If the Board should approve the applicants' proposal, CSXT would move between 13 to 15 trains per day...." the STB notice advised. Most of these trains would come from CSXT's Louisville-to-Cincinnati corridor. That corridor, known as the LCL Subdivision "...is close to operating at capacity, and that, because of steep grades and tight curves on the LCL Subdivision, CSXT must restrict both the length and speed of its trains." the notice stated.

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All of the planned improvements won't happen overnight, if the proposal is approved. Instead, CSXT will take up to seven years before it could complete the project. CSXT would not be able to "materially" increase train traffic on the L&I rail line until it completes those planned improvements.

Once those improvements are done, however, CSXT would "...move additional through trains, mostly carrying automobiles and automobile parts over the rail line."

Proposed improvements include:

- Installation of heavier weight, continuously-welded rail over the entire length of the L&I line;
- Adding "hot box" detectors which can prevent overheating by measuring the temperature of bearings as the train travels;
- Replacing older cross-ties and adding new ballast (rock);
- Replacing the Flatrock River railroad bridge, a truss bridge that currently has height and weight restrictions and is located in Columbus;
- Increasing the size of rail sidings in the communities of Elvin and Brook;
- Building new sidings at Crothersville and Underwood.

The increase in size of existing rail sidings and the proposed new sidings will enable trains to more easily pass one another. All of the changes, according to the proposal, "...will allow CSXT to move freight more quickly and more economically than it moves today."

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The draft environmental assessment (EA) "...preliminarily concludes that CSXT's proposed transaction would adversely affect two...areas: emergency response/vehicle delay and noise/vibration," the notice stated. As noted, the rail line splits several communities, including Columbus, Seymour, Crothersville, Austin, Scottsburg and Sellersburg.

Scottsburg is fortunate to have two fire stations, but both are west of the rail line as is its police department. Austin's fire station is also west of the tracks, and its police department is located on the east side. Scott County EMS is headquartered just north of Scott Memorial Hospital, both of which are west of the rail lines.

These matters are not pointed out in the environmental analysis letter per se, but the draft analysis stated that, to reduce potential adverse effects, mitigation measures have been developed "...and (we) are recommending to the (ST) Board impose these (and other) measure in any decision approving the proposed transaction."

Written comments about aspects of the draft environmental analysis were required to be submitted to the Office of Environmental Analysis (OEA) by Monday, September 30. The final analysis will be issued by November 6, and the STB plans to issue a final decision by December 6.