

Canadian National tweaks EJ&E operations

(The following story by John D. Boyd appeared on The Journal of Commerce website on August 11, 2009.)

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Canadian National Railway is still grappling with mechanical breakdowns and operational snags on its short line tracks outside Chicago, as it tries to sort out the problems causing its trains to block suburban roads.

In its latest monthly report to the Surface Transportation Board – part of an intensive oversight process the board required when it approved the short line purchase – CN said trains on the former Elgin, Joliet & Eastern Railway line blocked roadways nine times in events lasting 10 minutes or more.

That July list showed one less 10-minute-plus blockage than in June, continuing a record of slow progress in recent months. Local concerns that the acquisition would lead to worse traffic congestion in the area prompted a number of suburbs to fight the merger.

Since CN took operational control early this year, it reported 50 blockages in March -- the first month it ran EJ&E -- and quickly pared that down to 14 in April. May had 11, and each month since then has managed to reduce it a bit further.

But the latest report also showed a persistent mix of mechanical and operational errors, from a bad air compressor triggering the brakes – and causing a train to block a Sauk Village road crossing for 83 minutes -- to miscommunications with another railroad to track switch maintenance issues and broken knuckle couplers.

The railroad is trying to work out such kinks at a time when traffic is down from the recession, and has so far shifted only four trains from other CN routes onto the EJ&E track belt that curves west of the downtown.

It wants to improve EJ&E tracks and operations to eventually take more CN trains out of the congested central city, and speed its cross-country intermodal and general freight trains around Chicago up to a day faster than now.

Recently, railroads have begun to see business pick up. Karen B. Phillips, CN's Washington, D.C.-based vice president for North American government affairs, told the STB that six EJ&E trainmen who had been furloughed returned to work. However, she said train counts on the EJ&E “remain below pre-transaction levels due to lower traffic volumes.”

CN kept up its community interactions in July. Railroad police gave several Operation Lifesaver presentations at a summer school program in New Lenox, Ill., to build public awareness about the dangers of trespassers getting onto tracks or of cars ignoring crossing signals and getting in the way of trains.

Phillips reported that a car in the Park Forest, Ill., suburb struck a train July 11 after the car slid under the lowered crossing arm that warned of a train on the way.

However, CN also said crossing gates malfunctioned July 15 at Plainfield, with lights on and the gates down for so long that police had to direct traffic around the gates to get cars across the tracks. This was not one of the above-listed blockages for July, since those only include crossings blocked

by trains that are stopped at least 10 minutes.

“Unfortunately, it took an unusually long time to make this repair,” wrote Phillips, and we have taken action to ensure that such a delay does not occur again.”