Pedestrian Rail Safety Symposium  
June 22, 2010  

Introductory Remarks  

My name is Ian Savage, I am a longtime faculty member of the Department of Economics and the Transportation Center at Northwestern University.  

Thank you for coming. The purpose of today is to be a working meeting, not a parade of talking heads. We have a remarkable collection of experience and talent here today, and we want to put you to work.  

Northwestern’s Transportation Center has been around since 1954, and prides itself on its interdisciplinary approach to important contemporary questions on public policy. One of our activities is hosting regular seminar series. One of these is our “Sandhouse Gang” seminar series on railroad topics that appeal to faculty, students and industry professionals. Among the members of the Sandhouse Gang is Administrator Szabo of the Federal Railroad Administration.  

We were approached by the City of Lake Forest who had suffered a series of pedestrian deaths around the railroad. In part Lake Forest recognized that the northern suburbs were witnessing a phenomenon that had been faced by the western and northwest suburbs for some time, and wanted to discern some best practice and experience of what has worked and what hasn’t worked to ameliorate the risks.  

But in part, Lake Forest discerned that there were two common features of some recent tragedies that introduce a new contemporary wrinkle to a decades’ old debate.  

The first is that the victims were talking on mobile phones moments prior to stepping in front of a train. I wasn’t there, so I can’t say how much this distraction contributed to the incidents, but it fits into a debate that Secretary LaHood has emphasized in the past year. Be it auto drivers speaking on the phone, train engineers text messaging, pedestrians with i-pods, or pilots using their laptops or having non-pertinent conversations, distraction is a big issue for the US Department of Transportation and the National Transportation Safety Board.  

The second is pedestrians are being caught out by unexpected things – Amtrak trains that show up at seemingly random times, freight trains running on the center track, skip-stop express trains running just ahead of a stopping train, the “second train” at a crossing. These problems are decades old, but there is now a debate in this country about high-speed rail. These high-speed trains are still going to have to snake their way through the suburbs before accelerating through the cornfields. How are we going to accommodate these high-speed trains in our flatlands where commuters access their suburban platforms on the level?
Both of these are new aspects that mean that there has to be change from the “same old, same old” approach. Indeed I have concerns whether the “same old, same old” is really doing its job. In the past forty years, though a combination of engineering upgrades, public education and enforcement we have reduced the risk to motor vehicles at grade crossings by 90% or more. However, we have not had the same success with pedestrian and trespassing fatalities.

So that is your task this afternoon. After some introductory remarks we are going to split into three groups, each of which will consider one of the “three E’s”:

- Education and communication
- Engineering and design
- Enforcement

Basically these will be brainstorming sessions. We want you to bring your experience and vision to suggest initiatives and new ideas. No idea should be considered too outlandish or silly. We will have rapporteurs in each session who will be taking notes and bring back to us as a group, later this afternoon, the findings and suggestions. We will also be writing up our deliberations to share with a wider audience than those who can be here this afternoon.

Finally, I would like to publicly thank Lake Forest for having the public spiritedness to recognize that the tragedies that have occurred in and near their community have wider public policy implications that affect all communities in Chicago area and in those communities be they in Florida, Boston or Southern California where pedestrians and trains mix.