NU forum targets pedestrian-train accidents

Cell phones, personal music players can overcome warning signals, experts say

By Richard Wronski, Tribune reporter

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Frustrated by two deaths along railroad tracks in Lake Forest, city officials and transportation experts said they have concluded the "Stop, Look and Listen" safety adage is no longer effective.

One victim, a 43-year-old Grayslake woman, was killed in December by a speeding Amtrak train she apparently mistook for a Metra train stopping at the west Lake Forest station, according to officials.

Then in February, an 18-year-old Lake Forest Academy senior was killed while walking along the railroad tracks.

In both cases, officials said, the victims had disregarded the dangers.

"We have to find a better way to get the message out," Lake Forest Mayor James Cowhey Jr. said at a pedestrian rail safety symposium Tuesday at Northwestern University's Transportation Center.

Warning bells and lights, signs and slogans are no match for modern-day distractions, particularly the cell phones, personal music players and other devices increasingly used, experts said.

The proliferation of such personal electronic devices often causes the public to be oblivious to surroundings, said Reilly McCarren, national chairman of the rail safety organization Operation Lifesaver.

Michael Bennett, a safety expert with the Federal Railroad Administration, cited many cases of youths who were killed by trains while talking on cell phones, or who were on tracks and didn't hear approaching trains because they were listening to devices like iPods.

The symposium members suggested a number of new approaches to increase railroad safety, especially public service messages and interactive warnings aimed especially at young people.

Lake Forest police Chief Joseph Buerger stressed more education about crossing laws and enforcement of violations.

"When police write a ticket," Buerger said, "they're doing it to protect people from themselves."