

Agenda Date: April 23, 2003
Item Number: B1

Docket: TR-030518
Company Names: Yakima County, Yakima Interurban Lines Association

Staff: Ahmer Nizam, Regulatory Analyst

Recommendation:

Enter an order in Docket TR-030518, authorizing installation of R15-3 “exempt” crossing signs along the 1W line in Yakima County

Background:

The 1W railroad line, also known as the “Naches” line, is located in Yakima County and extends approximately 13 miles between the cities of Yakima and Naches. The line has been out of service since 1999, and no plan exists for rail traffic to resume in the foreseeable future. The Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission has authority over 14 of the 18 railroad-highway grade crossings along line 1W. The remaining four are located within the City of Yakima, where the Commission’s authority does not extend due to Yakima’s first class jurisdictional status. The 14 crossings under Yakima County’s jurisdiction which are the subjects of this proceeding are listed in attachment A.

Although there is currently no opportunity for train-related accidents to occur at any of the 14 crossings, certain vehicles are required by RCW 46.61.360 to stop, look, and listen for approaching trains at each crossing. Vehicles that are subject to the requirement are those carrying passengers for hire, school buses, and transporters of hazardous substances. The statute, however, exempts certain crossings from the stopping requirement, including “any railroad grade crossing at which an official traffic control device as designated by the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission, pursuant to RCW 81.53.060, gives notice that the stopping requirement imposed by this section does not apply.” The applicable traffic control device is a sign designated by the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices as an R15-3 or “exempt” sign. The presence of this sign at a railroad-highway grade crossing informs drivers of vehicles that are otherwise required to stop that a stop is not required, except when a train is occupying or approaching the crossing.

Eliminating the stopping requirement mitigates disruptions to traffic flow and the potential for rear-end vehicle collisions related to vehicles stopping unexpectedly. When a rail line is actively used by trains, the safety benefit of the stopping requirement takes precedence over these potential highway impacts. In the case of the crossings along the 1W line, installing exempt signs serves to improve roadway safety and efficiency where there is no potential for vehicle-train collisions.

In August of 2002, Staff contacted Yakima County to discuss installation of the signs for the reasons mentioned above. Subsequently, Yakima County and the Yakima Interurban Lines Association, as custodian of the rail line, have filed letters consenting to the entry of an order by the Commission approving Staff's request. Furthermore, Yakima County has agreed to fund and install the signs, as long as doing so relieves them of having to repaint the railroad pavement markings on the roadway approaches to each crossing. This condition is acceptable due to the absence of trains on the 1W line. Both Yakima County and the Yakima Interurban Lines Association understand and have stated in writing that the exempt signs will be removed and the railroad pavement markings will be repainted before any train traffic resumes on the line. This condition is also specified in the order.

Summary:

The installation of R15-3 or "exempt" signs at the 14 crossings listed in Attachment A and located along the 1W line serves the public interest by removing stopping requirements that are unnecessary due to absence of train traffic. If, at some future date, train traffic resumes on the 1W line, the signs must be removed, thereby reinstating the stopping requirement set forth by RCW 46.61.360, and the crossings must be brought into full compliance with all applicable state and federal requirements for railroad-highway grade crossings.

Conclusion:

Given the lack of current or foreseeable train traffic on 1W rail line, and therefore no opportunity for vehicle-train collisions at railroad-highway grade crossings located along the line, Staff recommends that the Commission authorize the installation of "exempt" crossing signs along the 1W line in Docket TR-030518.