

Agenda: August 27, 2003  
Item Number: **B1**

**Docket Number:** **TR-990654**  
Company: The Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway Company (BNSF)

Staff: Mike Rowswell, Rail Safety Manager  
Ahmer Nizam, Regulatory Analyst

**Recommendation:**

Enter a Supplemental Order in Docket TR-990654, amending the original Order to remove condition three as a result of changes that have occurred within the city of Sumner, and consenting to the increase of train speeds through the city to the limits set by the Federal Railroad Administration.

**Background:**

On June 22, 2000, the Commission entered an order approving train speed increases through the city of Sumner (City), subject to the completion of certain safety improvements. Currently, freight train speed limits vary between 40 and 50 mph and passenger trains are limited to 65 mph. The speed limits sought by Burlington Northern & Santa Fe Railway Company (BNSF or Company) and set by the Federal Railroad Administration are 60 mph for freight trains and 79 mph for passenger trains. The original order in TR-990654 conditioned the train speed increases on the following:

- (1) Permanent median barriers must be constructed at Williams Avenue, the west side of the Zehnder Street crossing, and at Main Street.
- (2) The Railroad shall inspect the circuitry at all crossings to ensure that it is capable of operating properly at high speeds.
- (3) A traffic light shall be constructed at the intersection of Wood and Zehnder Streets, and a repeater signal installed on the west side of the Zehnder Street crossing. The signals shall be interconnected with the crossing warning system. An extra set of warning lights shall be installed directed towards Pease Road.

Staff has verified that condition one has been met by the satisfactory installation of median barriers at Main Street, the closure and abandonment of the Williams Street crossing, and an amendment to the Order, entered on August 14, 2002, that relieved BNSF of the condition to install median barriers on the west side of Zehnder Street due to geometric constraints making their installation impractical.

Staff has also verified that condition two of the Order has been satisfied through the installation of constant warning train detection circuitry at all of the crossings within Sumner.

Condition three of the Order has been partially completed with the installation of an extra set of flashing light signals directed towards Pease Road. The remainder of condition three involves the installation of a highway traffic signal at the Zehnder Street/Wood Avenue roadway intersection, and a “repeater” signal (pre-signal) on the west side of the Zehnder Street grade crossing. Staff’s recommendation to include these conditions in the original order was based, in part, on the fact that the Zehnder Street grade crossing was located along the City’s primary truck route, and that the available vehicle storage space between the tracks and the stop line at the Zehnder Street/Wood Avenue intersection is only 45 feet. Heavy trucks and other tandem vehicles that traveled east on Zehnder would frequently extend onto the BNSF main track when they made the required stop at the Zehnder Street/Wood Avenue roadway intersection. The intent of the condition was to require a mechanism to clear any vehicles that may be stopped on the tracks or within the crossing’s dynamic envelope<sup>1</sup> when a train approaches the crossing.

Discussion:

The construction of a new roadway at Puyallup Street in June 2003 resulted in re-designation of the City’s truck route away from Zehnder Street. Although Zehnder Street is still used by some trucks for local access, the volume of heavy truck traffic has decreased considerably, thereby reducing the exposure of semi- trucks and other tandem vehicles to trains at the crossing.

In a letter dated August 4, 2003, the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway Company informed the city of Sumner that it plans to increase freight train speeds through the City by ten miles per hour (i.e. from 40 mph to 50 mph) on September 2, 2003. Currently, the Zehnder Street crossing is the only section on the BNSF main line through Sumner where trains are required to slow from 50 mph to 40 mph. The Company plans to implement this incremental increase in its freight train speeds to improve the efficiency of operations on its 1E line, and cites the change in truck route as support for doing so prior to the installation of the traffic signal and pre-signal at the Zehnder Street grade crossing. The letter further states that BNSF will not increase trains speeds beyond the initial ten mile per hour freight train speed increase until the traffic signal and pre-signal are installed, but “no later than spring 2004.” A copy of the letter was filed by Commission Staff on August 11, 2003, as BNSF’s request to amend the Order entered in TR-990654.

Conclusion:

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<sup>1</sup> The dynamic envelope is the area 6 feet outside of each rail that requires total clearance for the train and its cargo overhang.

All of the conditions set forth in TR-990654 have either been met or waived, except for the installation of the highway traffic signals and pre-signal at the Zehnder Street grade crossing. This requirement was largely based on the fact that Zehnder Street was the City's primary truck route at the time the Order was entered. Because the truck route has since been changed to avoid the Zehnder Street grade crossing, the problems previously associated with long wheelbase vehicles using the crossing are not sufficiently severe and unique to require that the improvements be completed before train speeds increase. Staff therefore recommends that the Commission amend the Order entered in Docket TR-990654 to remove condition three relating to the installation of a highway traffic control signal and pre-signal at the Zehnder Street grade crossing as a prerequisite for increasing train speeds. Despite this recommendation, Staff will continue to work with BNSF and Sumner to improve safety at the Zehnder Street grade crossing, including improving available vehicle storage, providing better warning to drivers regarding the limited space available east of the tracks, and ultimately, installation of the traffic signal and pre-signal.

Staff's recommendation is based on changes to the operational characteristics of highway traffic over the Zehnder Street grade crossing. Staff further recommends that, in recognition of the work completed by BNSF in accordance with conditions one and two of the original order, and the closure of the Williams Avenue grade crossing, the Order provide the Commission's consent to the increase of train speed limits through the city of Sumner to those allowed by the Federal Railroad Administration.