

Double tracking to affect traffic on busy Route 347 in Maricopa

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MARICOPA - Union Pacific Railroad is preparing to double-track the train route through Maricopa, doubling the amount of train traffic through the city.

High gas prices have more distributors moving toward trains, which can haul the load of 300 semi-trucks, said Zoe Gisela-Richmond, director of corporate relations for Union Pacific. Also, there has been a demand for more rail service in Arizona for some time.

The Arizona Corporation Commission hosted a public hearing on the project in Maricopa July 31.

"There is going to be a significant increase in train traffic and we want to make sure crossings are as safe as can be," said Kristin Mayes, a corporation commissioner. "Union Pacific is required to make sure these crossings are safe."

Union Pacific estimates 40 trains cut through Maricopa every day. That number is expected to double, at least, once double tracking is completed.

The commission is looking at four crossings in Maricopa, located at Porter Road, White and Parker Road, Hartman Road and Arizona 347.

"The (Arizona) 347 is one of the busiest crossings in Arizona without an underpass or overpass," Mayes said.

Commissioner Gary Pierce said he worries about the amount of congestion and frustration that could be caused by adding another track without an overpass.

The Arizona Department of Transportation estimates grade separation (overpass) construction could be completed in five years.

Both commissioners said five years simply would be too long.

"With train traffic increasing, a backup two or three lights long is not something you want to see," Pierce said. "That's going to create a lot of tension and the potential for danger."

Gisela-Richmond said Union Pacific typically pays 5 percent of construction costs. A \$35 million chunk of construction would be funded by a state transportation initiative if voters vote for the one-cent sales tax increase in November.

Another option for the 347 crossing would be to add a bypass route that would relieve traffic backups.

Pinal County and area cities recently announced an agreement under which Union Pacific will support improvements at other crossings that are not on state highways.

The commission will host an evidentiary hearing Aug. 19 at its Phoenix offices, 1200 W. Washington St. The meeting begins at 9 a.m.