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Boosted rail traffic will mean delays

Border, Tucson to get more trains

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Sonora is far ahead of Arizona in adapting its infrastructure to compensate for an increase in train traffic that will cost millions of dollars to alleviate in metropolitan Tucson.

Last month, Ford Motor Co.'s assembly plant in Hermosillo, Sonora, began pumping up its production of cars exported to the United States. The \$1.2 billion expansion of the existing stamping and assembly plant translates into a maximum capacity of 300,000 cars a year, 90 percent of which will be exported through the Nogales downtown port of entry up to Tucson, said Herman Morfin, spokesman for Ford Motor Company de Mexico in Mexico City.

That means one extra train a day coming into Arizona from Mexico, one specifically for Ford automobiles, said U.S. Customs and Border Protection spokesman Brian Levin. On average, the port receives one train a day and sometimes as many as three, Levin said.

After a stop at a switching station north of Nogales, Tucson receives six trains a day from Mexico and eventually will receive two to three more every day, said Paul Casertano, a senior planner with the Pima Association of Governments.

Traffic delays will increase within the city as still more trains are expected through the main line that runs parallel to Interstate 10 in the metropolitan area, Casertano said.

One of those increased shipments consists of steel heading from Chicago to Hermosillo through Tucson, said Alan Levin, who, with his family, built owns and operates the Port of Tucson, an industrial park and "intermodal" inland port near South Wilmot Road and Interstate 10. In the last three months, he's increased the number of rail cars to six to eight per day from one or two.

Time delays for traffic and specific increases in the number of trains were not available Friday afternoon.

To compensate for the increase, city officials are looking at overpasses or underpasses like the existing one on Orange Grove Road, Casertano said. But that type of project costs about \$60 million and would take a long time to build because crews would have to work around the train schedules.

Re-striping at intersections and early warning devices like the pre-signal for westbound traffic on Prince Road are cheaper ways to alleviate traffic delays, he said.

Another solution is a \$1 million-a-mile railroad bypass to divert the rail cars south of Tucson, said Augustine Garcia, director of the Tucson-Mexico Trade Office.

In this case, Sonora is far ahead of Arizona in adapting to the train traffic that, in Nogales, Sonora, essentially splits the city in two every time a mile-long train rolls through the port, said Fernando Sandoval of the border issues committee for the Arizona-Mexico Commission.

In Sonora, the federal and state governments spent \$8 million to \$10 million adding an overpass in the plaza three

miles south of the border, and a second is being built at about the same price half a mile from the border to ease the traffic backups, Sandoval said.

"If you look at the U.S. side, you're looking at probably a little bit longer planning cycle given the fact that some of the solutions available to us on the U.S. side are a little more expensive," Garcia said.

Tucson is still studying the issue, Garcia said.

The increased train traffic has already begun.

Starting this week, the Hermosillo plant is moving a build-up of inventory on an exclusive train to the United States, said Al Altuna, an economic development specialist with the Tucson-Mexico Trade Office.

In November, three trains a day will leave the Ford plant, Altuna said.

It's not known if the bypass south of Tucson will be completed by then or if it will even be built, Altuna said.

"There's no estimate because we don't know exactly how long or where it's going to be. Any bypass will cost \$1 million per mile, and it can be anywhere from 10 to 15 miles" to lay the rail down alone, Altuna said.

Santa Cruz County is woefully unprepared for the increase in train traffic, said County Manager Greg Lucero.

"The biggest concern is for law enforcement and fire," he said. More trains or longer trains mean emergency workers have to race up to Arizona 82 to cross over the railroad tracks and get to the other side of Nogales and Santa Cruz County, Lucero said.

"If we've got any kind of emergency situation on one side or the other, it's going to create major problems for us," he said.

But in spite of the county's concerns, there's been no discussion on what to do, he said.

"There's nothing on the books to deal with the amount of train traffic that's going to come through," Lucero said.

In Sahuarita, a third railroad crossing is being added near a subdivision to compensate for the increased railroad traffic, said Sahuarita communications manager Barbara Dolan.

"That's going to affect people's quality of life," she said, referring to the potential traffic delays for the people living in that subdivision.

As it stands, people in Nogales, Sonora, deal with the train every day.

With an enormous bellow of its horn, a slowing train rolled on a recent day toward the steel gate of the U.S.-Mexican border, and within a minute, the rush began.

Alejandra Valenzuela gripped her steering wheel as the traffic backed up behind her pickup truck. Car horns drowned out the shrill squealing of the train's steel wheels. A red car tried to sneak by the Nogales, Sonora, woman, then stopped as an oncoming driver had the same idea. Valenzuela's body jumped forward as the yellow truck behind her tapped her bumper in the backup. More car horns. Small crowds on foot began to mass on both sides of the train. The more daring among them scrambled between the rail cars.

It's a familiar scene - for 40 minutes, this busy stretch of the city is divided in two.

"You see what happens?" Valenzuela says. "In the morning, in the afternoon. You never know when the trains are coming."

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