

# Federal grant eases Commerce Street crossing issues

📅 November 5, 2024    👤 Bob Bakken

*Photo: Cars travel across the Commerce Street railroad crossing on Tuesday, Nov. 5. Trains blocking the crossing had been stopping traffic during the noon hour for as long as 30-40 minutes. (Bob Bakken/desotocountynews.com)*



Gone are the days where many Hernando residents or those who worked in Hernando spent much of their lunch hour stuck at the Commerce Street railroad crossing, trying to get from one side of the city to another.

No commerce was done on Commerce Street during that hour with the Grenada Railroad track effectively knifing any movement between the east and the west. A similar blockage would take place later in the afternoon.

Locals knew ways to get around it all, but it certainly added extra travel time as drivers were trying to grab something to eat and get back to work on time.

Recent news of a grant from the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) to the Grenada Railroad has eased the meddlesome congestion. The grant assures that stopping for a train will not happen so often anymore or for so long. The FRA grant of \$18.2 million funds railroad crossing improvements that will keep the crossing stops to a minimum.

Hernando Mayor Chip Johnson said the people of Hernando have been rightfully upset for years about the train blocking the street at the crossing on an almost daily basis.

"It was almost like clockwork at around noon every day of the week, our intersection of Commerce Street was blocked by a train for half an hour," Johnson said. "Not only was it just a pain in the neck, but it was an economic problem. If you worked on this side of the tracks, you weren't going to go to lunch on the other side because you didn't know if you could get back to your job on time, and vice versa."

Many efforts were made by the city to find a solution, including the consideration of writing the train engineer a ticket for blocking too long. However, Johnson learned from the Mississippi Department of Transportation that, while state law would allow writing a ticket, federal law would override it.



The railroad crossing sign at Commerce Street in Hernando.

It was when Johnson asked the Board of Aldermen to pass a declaration of a plan for passage of a city ordinance against blocking the crossing that he got a phone call from an attorney for the railroad.

"We talked at length, and I also made sure that they understood that we appreciate the railroad," Johnson said.

What the mayor learned was that the Grenada Railway had a spur just south of Commerce Street where they were storing cars for Newlywed Foods in Horn Lake. That's because the Horn Lake spur was not big enough for that purpose.

For now, those cars have been relocated elsewhere and have shortened the length of blockage time down to about 5-10 minutes. While there's a cost to the railroad as part of the grant award, the railway got support from Johnson and others who wrote support letters to the FRA that helped get grant approval to benefit several towns along the rail route, from Horn Lake on south, including Hernando.

"We called our congressmen, our senators, and all these mayors, and we've got probably 20 letters of support to help support their grant application," Johnson said. "As part of the grant, they'll fix the Commerce and Vaiden crossings, but they'll use a big chunk of this money to build a larger spur in Horn Lake so all those Newlywed Foods cars can permanently be kept there."

As a grant recipient, the Grenada Railway will provide a 30 percent non-Federal match of \$7.8 million.

"This new grant will fund the upgrading and modernizing of our rail line from Canton to Southaven," said Ryan Rutledge of the Grenada Railway's parent company, Pinsly Railroad Company.

For now the reaction from the populace has been a non-reaction, but that's good because it means fewer people are complaining about it.

"People just aren't complaining about being stopped by the train anymore," Johnson said. "We have fewer complaints, because it just doesn't happen."

Johnson added the grant award to allow the Grenada Railway to rehab and upgrade the rail line and crossing is a huge win for cities the size of Hernando.

"Thas been a thorn in the side of Hernando for years," Johnson said about the problems at the crossing. "To be able to be part of finally getting it solved, I think it's a big deal. I think this is a win for the citizens of Hernando."

The news release announcing the grant award is found on the [Pinsly Railroad website](#).