



# Rail crossing issues in NWI

# A challenge for the State

## Blocked at-grade rail crossings

- Northwestern Indiana (NWI) is crisscrossed by nearly 700 miles of important rail corridors and dotted with at-grade railroad crossings.
- The at-grade rail crossings present challenges to our communities to keep roadway traffic moving safely and efficiently when trains pass through the crossings and temporarily close the road.
- At times the crossings are blocked by stopped trains.
- This issue is becoming worse and threatening the quality of life and safety of NWI, as well as the entire state of Indiana.

In September 2018, the Indiana Supreme Court struck down a state law that allowed local governments to ticket and fine trains who blocked crossings for undue amount of time.



The ruling brought state law in line with federal law which gives the federal government preemption over the issue. Local communities have observed that since the ruling, the issue of trains blocking at-grade crossing has only become worse.

In December 2018 NIRPC gathered a task force of local officials and stakeholders to discuss the Supreme Court case, its impacts on the quality of life and safety issue confronting our region, and options to address the issue.

# Overview of NWI's rail network

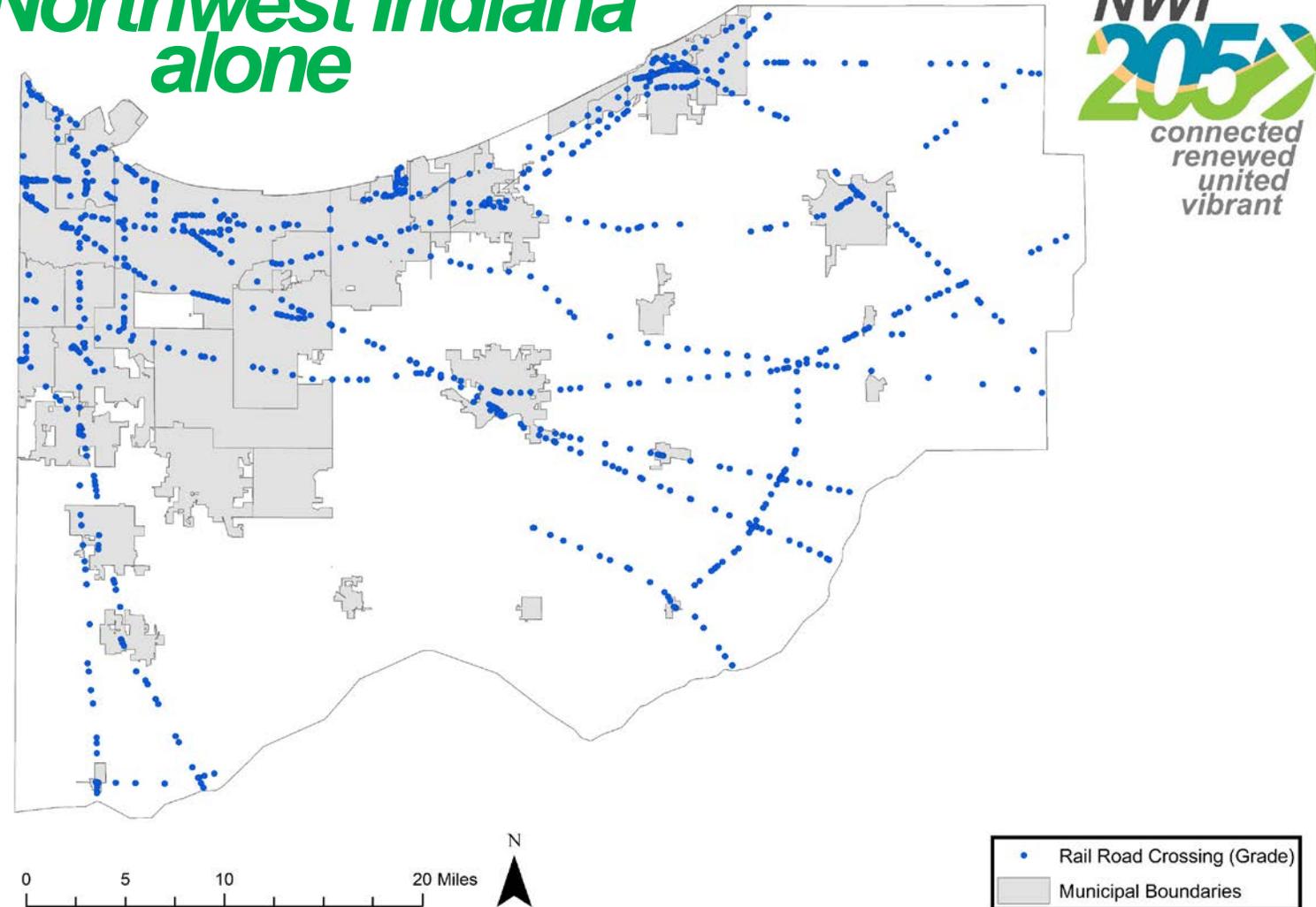
## Major rail operators

- 3 Class I freight railroads:
  - Canadian National
  - CSX
  - Norfolk Southern
- 2 passenger railroads:
  - South Shore Line
  - Amtrak

## Crossings

- Indiana ranked **sixth** for state w/ number of crossings ([INDOT Rail Plan](#))

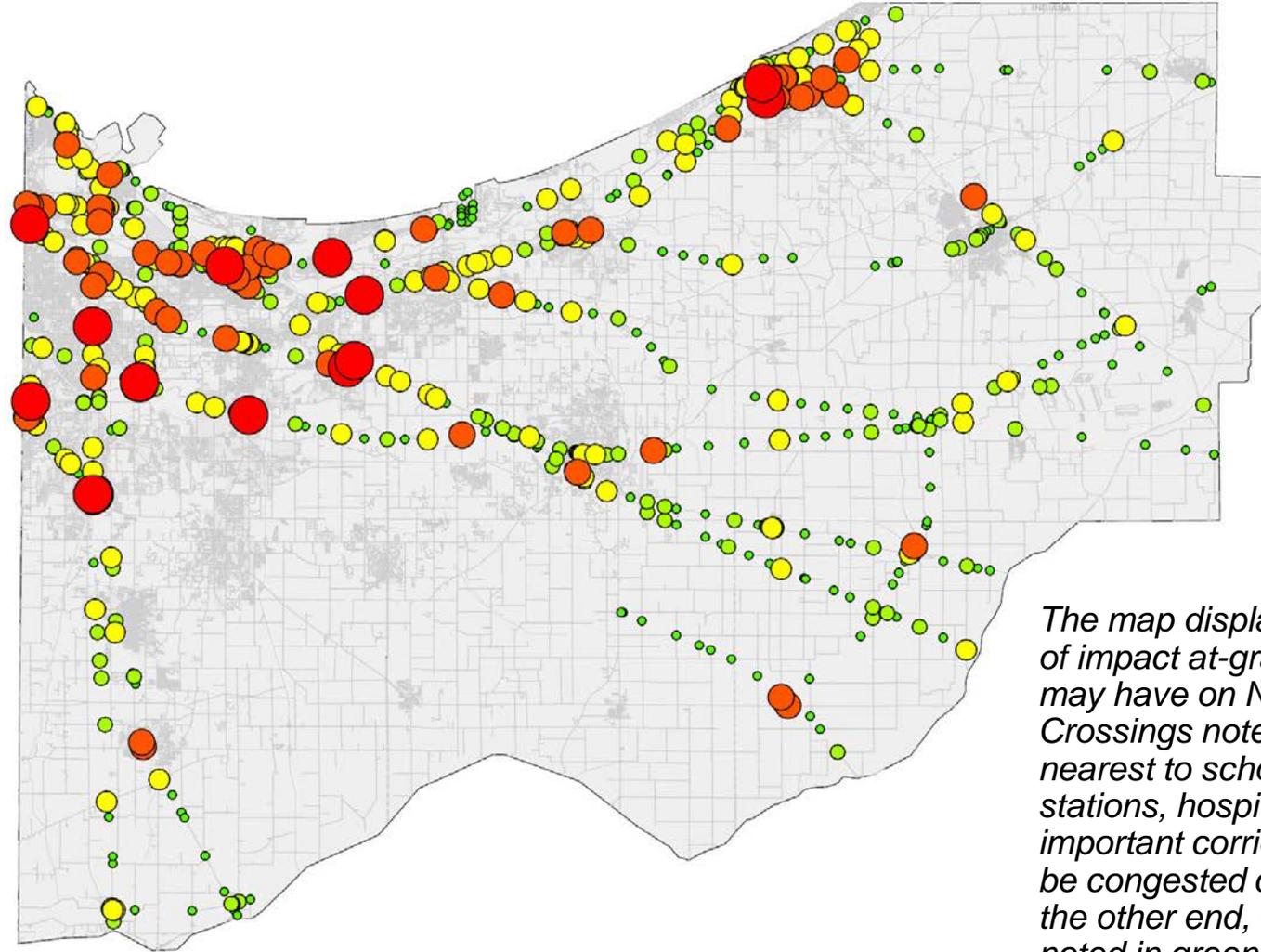
**886 at-grade crossings in Northwest Indiana alone**



# Understanding the impact

## Which crossings are the worst?

- NIRPC is working on evaluating updating its [2013 At-Grade Crossing Report](#), but early analysis in this update has factored in the following:
  - Crossings near schools
  - Crossings near fire stations
  - Crossings near hospitals
  - Crossings over important corridors
  - Crossings over congested roadway corridors
- *The map to the right highlights the key crossings to be further investigated.*



*The map displays the range of impact at-grade crossings may have on NWI. Crossings noted in red are nearest to schools, fire stations, hospitals, are on important corridors, or could be congested corridors. On the other end, crossings noted in green feature only a few of those issues of concern.*

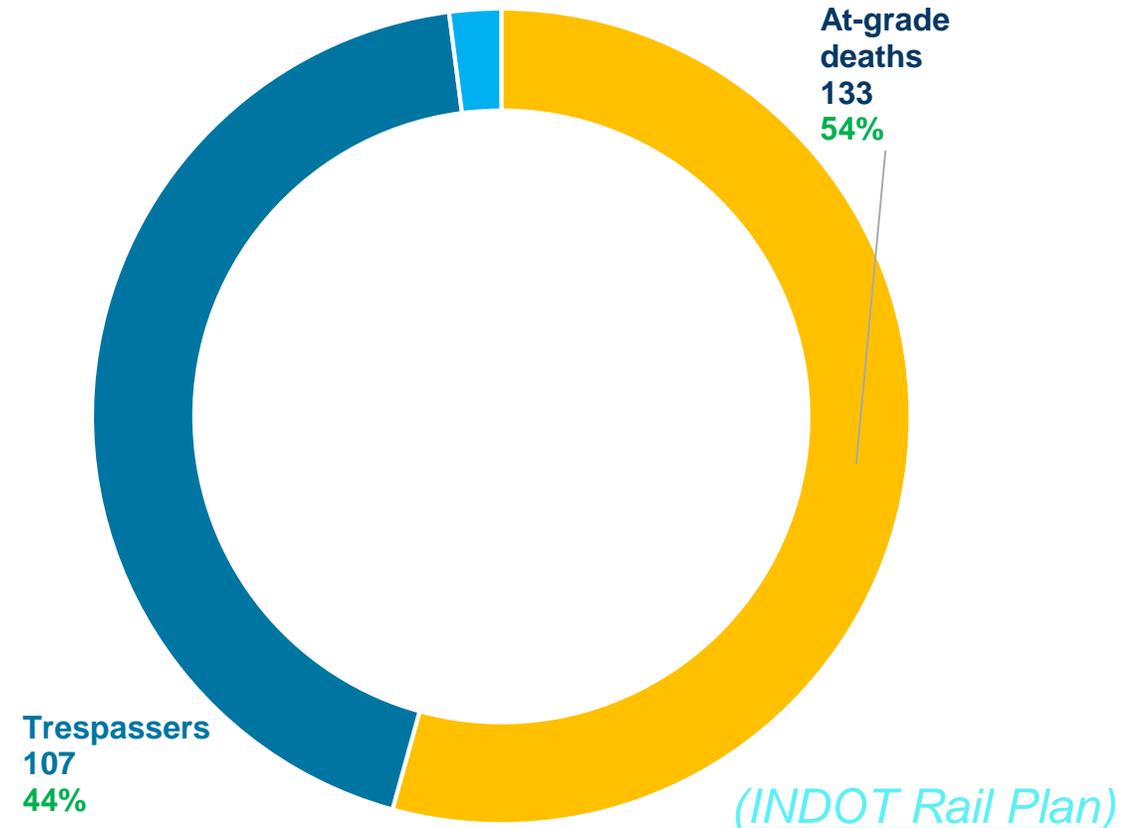
## NWI data

- Federal Railroad Administration reports:
  - 5 deaths
  - 7 injuries
- Lake and LaPorte counties had the highest number of crashes 2014-2016 ([INDOT Rail Plan](#))

## Statewide data

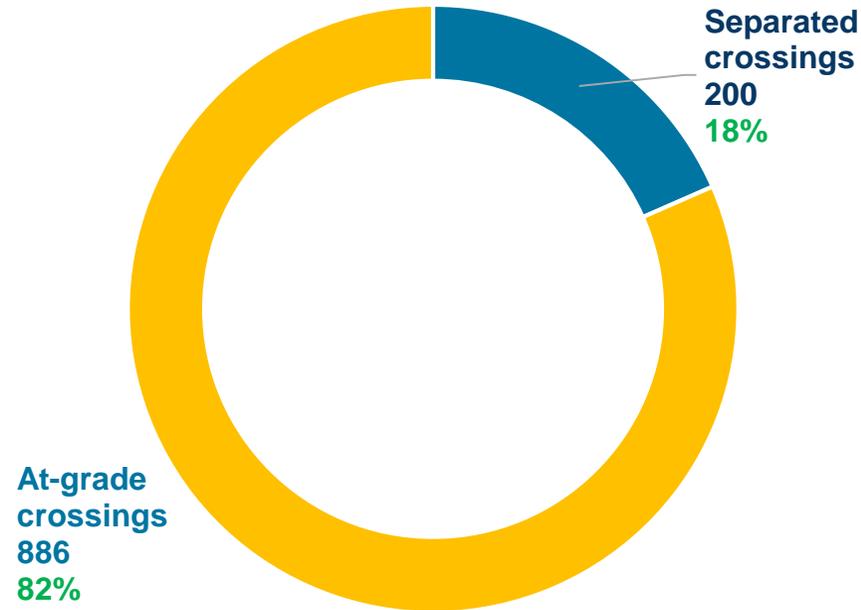
- Indiana is tied w/Louisiana for the most rail at-grade crossing related fatalities in the US
  - From 2007 – 2016 there were **133 deaths**
  - Only **37.2%** of crossings have a full warning system w/ flashing lights and gates
  - Risk of crashes is reduced by 88% w/flashing lights and gates
  - ([INDOT Rail Plan](#))

## Cause of fatalities 2007 – 2016



# Railroad crossings in NWI

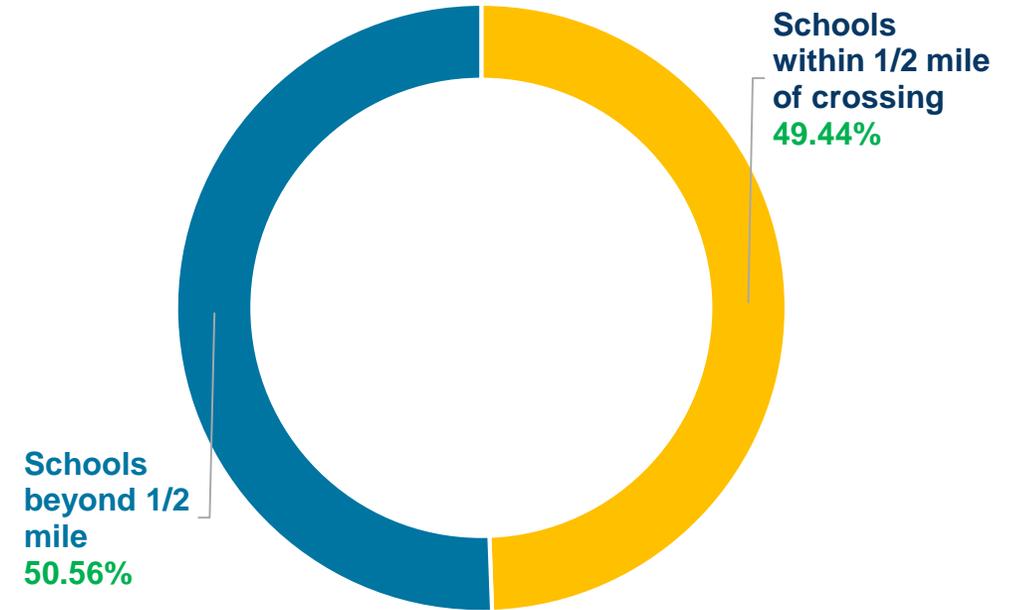
## Active rail crossings in NWI



### Why is this important?

There are 1,086 active rail crossings in Northwestern Indiana. With 82% of NWI's crossings at-grade this means delays – hopefully for only a couple of minutes – but if and when trains have their own red signal, this can mean blocked crossings for all roadway users including cars, buses, bicyclists and pedestrians. Delays due to train crossings are inconvenient at best, but at worst can be serious safety hazards if near schools, fire stations, or hospitals.

## Rail crossings near schools



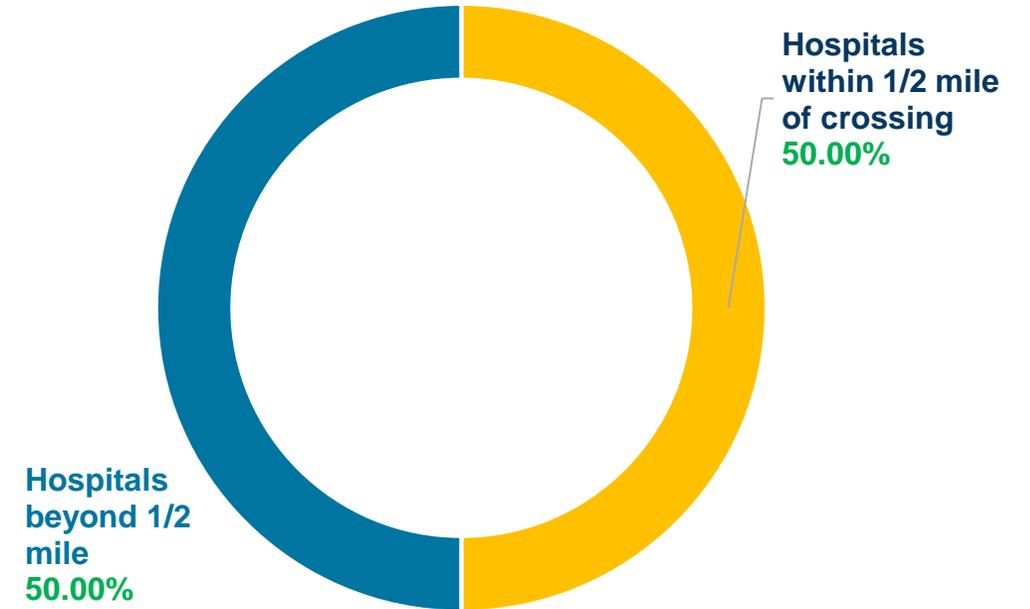
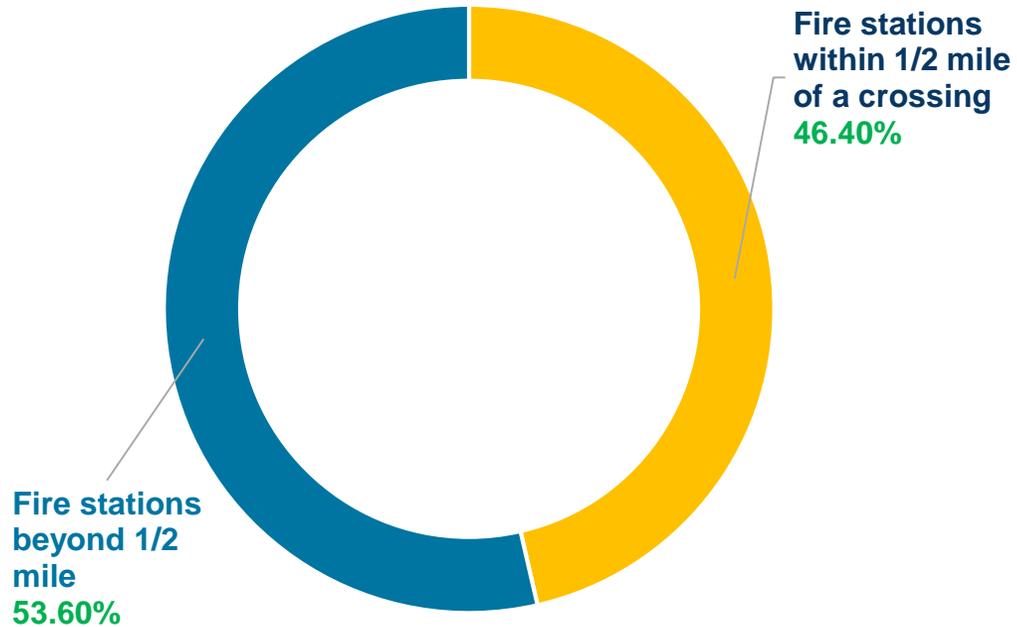
### Why is this important?

With so many at-grade crossings in NWI, it is hard to not have an impact on everyone. However, the impact on school children can be serious as they are vulnerable users of our transportation system. Nearly 1/2 of all schools in NWI are within 1/2 mile of a crossing. It has been reported by local officials that when crossings are blocked, children and their parents are unsafely crossing between rail cars to get to school.

# Railroad crossings in NWI

## Rail crossings near fire stations

## Rail crossings near hospitals



### Why is this important?

As with schools, nearly 1/2 of all fire stations in NWI are near an at-grade railroad crossing. This presents a hazard of delayed response times to emergencies if railroad crossings are blocked. Many of the freight trains coming through NWI are what are known as “unit-trains” carrying a single car type and can be up to 2-miles in length. If a train is stopped, it is not just one crossing that is blocked, but all crossings along the length of the train.

### Why is this important?

Hospitals are just like schools and fire departments in NWI – 50% are within 1/2 mile of a rail crossing. If a crossing is blocked, especially by a long freight train, this can make it impossible for emergency responders to find a quick alternative route to get to a hospital or fire station. Blocked crossings are also a quality of life nuisance due to the fact that idling trains and cars waiting for crossings to clear are unnecessarily emitting pollution all to wait. This is a public health issue that is avoidable.

## Delay

- # of trains daily
  - The 2013 study by NIRPC revealed some crossings have as many as **90** trains a day pass through a crossing
- # of minutes
  - The length of delay depends on the number of trains and length of trains. The 2013 study revealed that the worst crossings in NWI closed their gates for approximately **1.5 to 7.5 minutes** per closing. **Since the Indiana Supreme Court decision** removing a municipality's ability to ticket for prolonged blockages, it has been observed that these delays have become even more severe, with some blockages of **1-2 hours** in Hammond and elsewhere.

## Infrastructure cannot be the only solution

- The 2013 study estimated the cost to separate the worst crossings in NWI – just nine crossings – was almost \$200 million
- The Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) recently made funding available to separate crossings through a one-time grant program *LocalTrax*. NWI secured \$45 million in funding for just five projects.
- **Fixing the issue of blocked rail crossings with infrastructure solutions is extremely expensive; therefore we need to find alternate solutions to remedy our crossings from being blocked due to train idling.**

## Future

- The problem is only forecasted to get *worse*...
- [INDOT's Freight Plan](#) puts Lake County in the top spot for estimated freight traffic growth in Indiana by 2045
- Railroads are also examining autonomous trains which could increase the frequency of trains and reduce the amount of distance between trains – this would only make at-grade crossing delays worse for drivers, walkers, bicyclists, and bus riders.

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