

# TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION 2025-2026 EDUCATIONAL SERIES

## RAIL AND TRAFFIC SAFETY

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**Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT):** Public website offering information and resources for drivers, businesses, government officials, and anyone interested in learning about TxDOT.



**TxDOT 2025-2026 Educational Series:** Focuses on key transportation issues affecting TxDOT and Texas.





## OVERVIEW

With a total of 14,771 miles of track, Texas maintains the most rail lines of any state and the most public highway-rail grade crossings, with over 9,000 public, at-grade crossings. It is served by three Class I railroads and 55 Class III short line railroads, the latter operating on approximately 2,550 miles of track. These short line railroads play a critical role in connecting local industries to larger rail networks, providing essential first and last-mile services.

In 2005, the Texas Legislature transferred statewide rail planning and safety functions from the Texas Railroad Commission to the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT). TxDOT's rail responsibilities focus on planning and implementing freight and passenger rail projects and programs, managing state partnerships and state-owned rail facilities, such as the South Orient Rail Line, and improving the safety of rail-highway crossings. TxDOT also provides oversight of state and federal rail safety compliance, inspections, and operating practices throughout the state.

## FREIGHT RAIL IN TEXAS

Freight rail plays a crucial role in Texas's economy and infrastructure. According to the latest available data from the Surface Transportation Board, shippers use rail to move 410 million tons of freight in Texas. TxDOT projects this will increase to 708 million tons by 2050. Major commodities transported by rail include chemicals, nonmetallic minerals, coal, farm products, and mixed shipments. Rail freight movement is greatest along the rail lines connecting the major metropolitan areas and from seaports and international border crossings.

Despite its size, Texas' extensive rail system faces challenges related to congestion and capacity limitations along single-track sections and bridges with weight and speed restrictions. Conflicts with the highway system also exist near at-grade crossings. To address these issues, Class I railroads invest heavily in safety and siding extension projects across the state to address these problems and to provide more efficient track conditions for modern railroad operation practices.





## LEGAL OVERSIGHT

The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), under the United States Department of Transportation, regulates and enforces safety standards for railroad infrastructure, equipment, and operations. The Surface Transportation Board, an independent federal agency, oversees economic regulation ensuring the rail industry operates in a competitive and fair manner. TxDOT's regulatory and oversight responsibilities related to rail transportation come from the federal government and the Texas Legislature.

TxDOT also monitors potential rail line abandonments and coordinates the state's involvement in and response to abandonment filings. If a rail line owner abandons a rail line due to low traffic volumes, TxDOT analyzes whether the abandoned line could serve the state as a rail facility, future roadway, or expansion of an existing railroad. TxDOT is also responsible for administering lease and operating agreements on state-owned facilities and operating agreements on state-supported passenger routes.



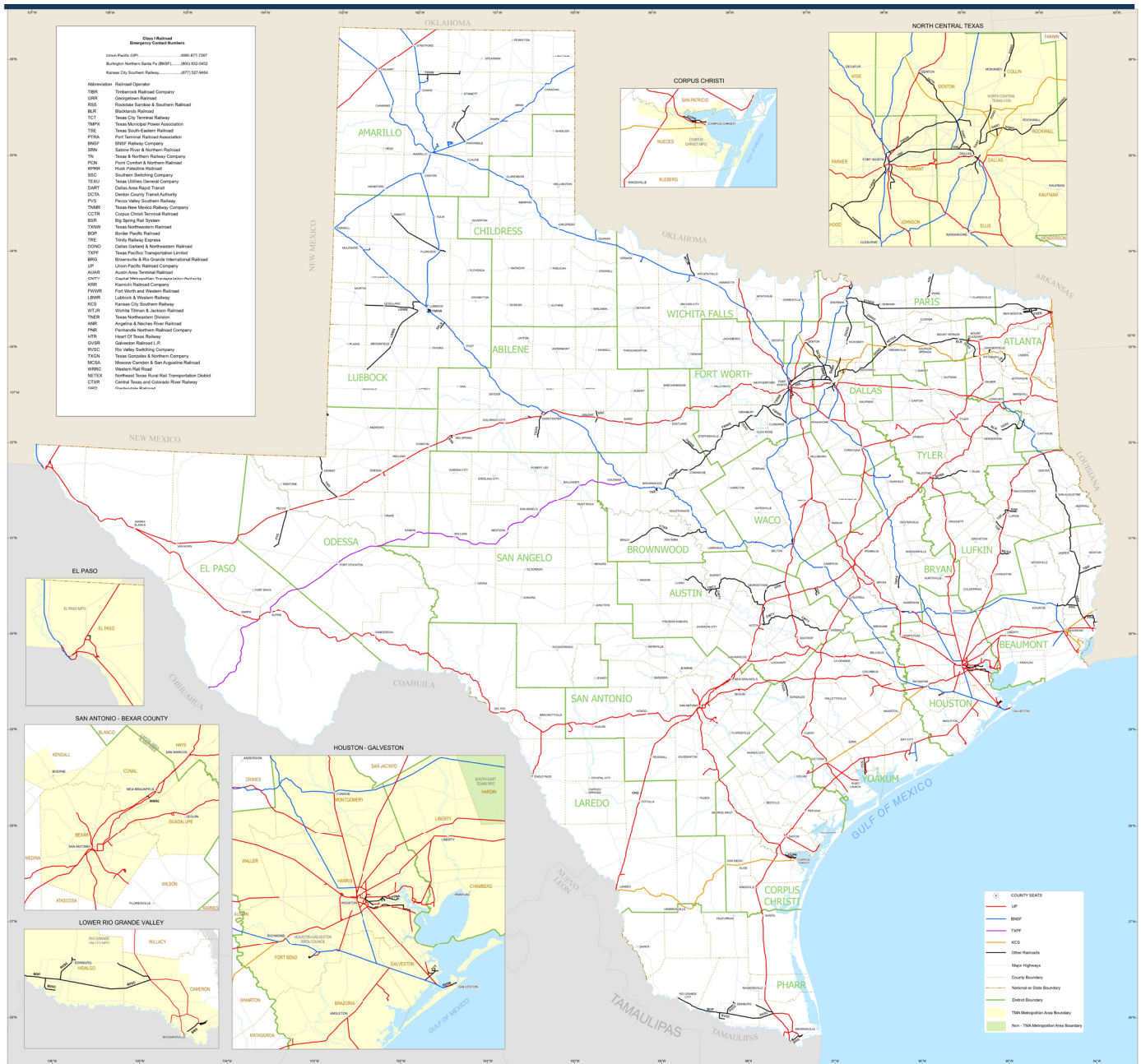
## BLOCKED CROSSINGS

Blocked railroad crossings can lead to a number of safety and traffic issues, including safety hazards and economic disruptions. In 1995, the Texas Legislature enacted a railroad anti-blocking statute (Section 471.007, Texas Transportation Code), which imposed penalties on railway companies if their trains blocked a crossing for more than ten minutes. However, in 2001, the United States Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals overturned the statute, ruling that federal law preempted state anti-blocking statutes. This was further confirmed in a 2005 opinion by the Texas Attorney General, which stated that the law, despite being slightly amended, was preempted by the federal Interstate Commerce Commission Termination Act. As a result, the statute was repealed in 2015.

To mitigate the effects of blocked crossings in Texas, TxDOT actively works on constructing grade separations, such as overpasses and underpasses, along state-owned and -maintained roadways. Railroad companies and local entities are responsible for maintaining rail-grade crossings that are not owned or maintained by the state.



# RAILROADS IN TEXAS MAP



## THE SOUTH ORIENT RAIL LINE

In 2001, as directed by the 77th Texas Legislature (Regular Session), TxDOT completed the acquisition of the South Orient Rail Line following an abandonment application by the prior owners. The South Orient Rail Line is 391 miles long, extending from San Angelo Junction, a few miles southwest of Coleman, through San Angelo to Presidio at the Texas-Mexico border. The South Orient Rail Line is one of only seven rail gateways between the United States and Mexico. TxDOT entered a 40-year lease agreement with Texas Pacifico Transportation, Ltd., in 2001 for the maintenance and operation of the rail line. The agreement contains a provision for up to five additional 10-year extensions if both parties agree.

When TxDOT acquired the South Orient Rail Line, the rail infrastructure was severely deteriorated due to deferred maintenance by the previous owners. Additionally, the previous owners constructed the rail gateway at the Presidio-Ojinaga International Rail Bridge, which was damaged by a fire in 2009, to connect with the Ferromex rail system at Presidio. Texas Pacifico reconstructed the bridge in 2019. TxDOT, Texas Pacifico, and United States Customs and Border Protection are currently constructing an inspection station to fully open the bridge for rail traffic. The construction is fully funded and will be completed before the end of 2025.





Amtrak fully funds two of the Texas routes: (1) the Texas Eagle (San Antonio to Chicago); and (2) the Sunset Limited (Los Angeles to New Orleans). TxDOT and the Oklahoma Department of Transportation jointly provide financial support to the third Amtrak route, the Heartland Flyer (Fort Worth to Oklahoma City). Texas' share of the annual subsidy ranges by operational needs from \$1.8 million to \$2.8 million. The Heartland Flyer provides once-daily service in each direction between Fort Worth and Oklahoma City with stops in Gainesville, Texas, and four Oklahoma cities. The Heartland Flyer operates on tracks owned by BNSF Railway.

### HIGH-SPEED RAIL

Texas Central Railway is a group of affiliated entities that obtained federal environmental and safety permits in 2020 to construct a Japanese Shinkansen-based high-speed passenger rail line between Dallas and Houston. In August 2024, Amtrak assumed ownership of the project and secured a \$64 million federal grant to further the necessary permitting processes with the Surface Transportation Board and other regulatory agencies. Importantly, TxDOT is not involved in the oversight or management of this project.

In a separate high-speed rail initiative, the North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG) received a federal grant in 2023 to conduct a feasibility study for high-speed rail between Fort Worth, Dallas, and Houston. This study aims to explore options for expanding high-speed rail infrastructure to serve the growing needs of Texas' major metropolitan areas.



## PASSENGER RAIL IN TEXAS

Under Chapter 201 of the Texas Transportation Code, TxDOT “shall coordinate activities regarding the planning, construction, operation, and maintenance of a statewide passenger rail system as well as with other entities involved with passenger rail systems, including governmental entities, private entities, and nonprofit corporations.”

Passenger rail categories include high-speed rail, intercity rail, commuter and regional rail, light rail, trolley, and tourism rail. While definitions may vary, high-speed rail runs at speeds greater than 110 mph on a dedicated track. Intercity rail primarily provides commuter service and operates at speeds slower than high-speed rail. Commuter and regional rail serve customers on daily trips between suburban and urban areas and may run on freight corridors. Light rail generally serves commuters typically within urban areas on dedicated corridors with specialized equipment

### INTERCITY PASSENGER RAIL

Amtrak is the sole provider of intercity passenger rail service in Texas, offering three service routes. These routes serve most major metropolitan areas throughout the state and Amtrak partners with motor coach bus services to provide connections to other areas not directly served by Amtrak.





## TEXAS RAIL PLAN

In 2024, TxDOT updated the Texas Rail Plan, which was developed in conjunction with stakeholders and the Federal Rail Administration to address existing and future passenger and freight rail services in Texas. The updated rail plan establishes the vision, goals, and objectives for the rail system and its integration into the state's multimodal transportation system. The plan also includes an inventory of freight and passenger rail infrastructure and an overall needs assessment.

## STATEWIDE RAIL SAFETY

### HIGHWAY-RAIL SAFETY IMPROVEMENTS

TxDOT administers federal and state programs to improve highway-rail grade crossings by partnering with railroads to install and maintain crossing signals and gates, improve crossing surfaces on state highways, consolidate and close redundant crossings, and construct highway-rail grade separations. TxDOT leverages federal railroad-highway crossings safety funds and negotiates with the Class I railroads for their cost participation in safety construction projects.

Funding for the highway-rail grade crossing program includes:

- \$21.1 million per year — Federal Railway-Highway Crossing Program;
- \$3.5 million per year — State Railroad Grade Crossing Re-planking (Re-Surfacing); and
- \$1.1 million per year — State Railroad Signal Maintenance.

In addition to the above funding, TxDOT has also applied for and has been awarded federal discretionary funds from the Railroad Crossing Elimination Grant Program. To date, Texas has received five awards to eliminate at-grade crossings throughout the state.

### HIGHWAY CONSTRUCTION COORDINATION

TxDOT is also responsible for facilitating railroad involvement with TxDOT highway construction projects. TxDOT executes more than 400 agreements annually with railroad companies for maintenance and construction activities involving railroad rights of way.

### RAILROAD SAFETY COMPLIANCE INSPECTIONS

Since 1982, the State of Texas has supported railroad safety compliance inspection efforts under the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) State Rail Safety Participation Program. States are authorized to work in partnership with the Federal Railroad Administration to enforce federal railroad safety laws and regulations (49 United States Code 20105, 49 Code of Federal Regulations Part 212). Currently, 31 states and the District of Columbia participate in the Federal Railroad Administration program. The Federal Railroad Administration certifies TxDOT Railroad Investigators to conduct investigative and surveillance activities to ensure railroad operators' compliance with federal rail safety regulations, orders, and standards. State Railroad Investigators conduct safety compliance inspections of railroad facilities and equipment, as do Federal Railroad Administration Railroad Safety Inspectors, to establish a uniform body of safety oversight and regulatory compliance. State Railroad Investigators monitor compliance with both state and federally mandated safety regulations in the areas of hazardous materials, operating practices, motive power and equipment, signals, track, and railroad bridges.





Freight railroad companies pay an annual assessment fee, referred to as the State Rail Safety Program Fee, based on gross ton-miles. These fee revenues fund the State Rail Safety Inspection Program.

### STATE SAFETY OVERSIGHT

In 1996, the United States Congress directed the Federal Transit Administration to establish the State Safety Oversight (SSO) Program to oversee safety at rail fixed guideway public transportation systems. In 1997, the Texas Legislature designated TxDOT as the administering agency for Texas and in 2017, the state law was amended to bring TxDOT into compliance with additional FTA SSO regulations. State Safety Oversight requirements include Public Transportation Agency Safety Plan development, accident notification and investigation, hazard management, corrective action oversight, on-site reviews, program auditing, and annual certifications. As the program administrator, TxDOT works with and provides oversight to these agencies to ensure that they meet federal safety standards.

Currently, six Rail Transit Agencies (RTA) are subject to the provisions of the State Safety Oversight program in Texas:

1. Dallas Area Rapid Transit;
2. Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County;
3. The Dallas Streetcar;
4. McKinney Avenue Transit Authority;
5. El Paso Streetcar; and
6. Galveston Island Trolley.

In November 2020, Austin voters approved “Project Connect,” an expansion plan for public transportation that includes two new light rail lines, the Blue Line and the Orange Line. The Austin Orange and Blue lines officially entered the State Safety Oversight Program beginning in 2023. Development of these new rail lines is transitioning from the alternatives analysis phases of development to preliminary engineering and environmental review, and TxDOT State Safety Oversight Program staff began coordination with the Austin Transit Partnership (an organization formed by the City of Austin and Capital Metro to implement Project Connect).



## MISSION

Connecting you with Texas.

## VISION

A forward thinking leader delivering mobility, enabling economic opportunity, and enhancing quality of life for all Texans.



## VALUES

### People

People are the Department's most important customer, asset, and resource. The well-being, safety, and quality of life for Texans and the traveling public are of the utmost concern to the Department. We focus on relationship building, customer service, and partnerships.

### Accountability

We accept responsibility for our actions and promote open communication and transparency at all times.

### Trust

We strive to earn and maintain confidence through reliable and ethical decision-making.

### Honesty

We conduct ourselves with the highest degree of integrity, respect, and truthfulness.



## PRIORITIES

### Safety

Design, build, operate, and maintain our transportation system with safety as our #1 priority.

### Delivery

Responsible program execution throughout the transportation life cycle (planning, design, construction, maintenance, and operations).

### Innovation

Forward-thinking, technology-focused, fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

### Stewardship

Professional, responsible stewards of resources.

