

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-061216metra-story,1,2812402.story>

Candid cameras for trains

Metra plans to use video to get evidence in accidents, target vandalism, security and trespassing problems

Video: [Watch train dodgers](#)

By Richard Wronski
Tribune staff reporter

Advertisement

December 16, 2006, 10:00 AM CST

The video taken from a Metra train cab is unnerving: In one scene, a woman, oblivious to the 130-ton engine bearing down on her, gingerly steps across the railroad tracks. In another, a youth clowning on a station platform suddenly darts in front of the train at the last moment in a deadly game of "chicken."

In February, the transit agency will begin installing digital video cameras on all its trains, enabling it to document the oblivious pedestrians, the taunting youths, and the motorists who, for whatever reason, feel compelled to drive around lowered gates and flashing lights, sometimes to their deaths.

The use of cameras on trains is a growing trend in the railroad industry, experts say, coming on the heels of improved digital technology and the need for railroads to protect themselves in the event of accidents.

Metra has been planning to install the cameras for many months.

Officials say the devices will provide valuable evidence after incidents like the one on Dec. 8 in which a Milwaukee District West Line train crushed a mini-van, killing two women and an infant. Authorities say the mini-van carrying eight people went around lowered gates at an Elgin grade crossing.

The driver, Epifania Alvarez-Navarrette, 25, has been charged with reckless homicide, driving without a license and other offenses.

So far this year, 18 people have been killed when Metra trains have hit vehicles or pedestrians.

In test videos, Metra has demonstrated that the kind of cameras to be installed next year clearly record the operation of gates and lights as trains approach crossings.

The cameras are intended not only as a tool in accident investigation but will also identify trespassing, security and vandalism problems along rail lines, said Richard Soukup, the agency's chief mechanical officer.

The videos may also be useful in educating the public against taking chances when dealing with trains and working with municipalities to keep people from trespassing on railroad rights-of-way.

But it was liability concerns that first prompted freight railroads to begin using cameras to provide a stronger

defense in expensive grade-crossing accident lawsuits, experts said.

"Clearly, Metra's law department are the ones the most interested in this," said Ian Savage, a professor of economics and transportation at Northwestern University.

Makers of train-camera technology have actively promoted their products at railroad industry conferences. Metra plans to install more than 500 cameras on its engines and cab cars in 2007, at a cost of about \$3.5 million.

The color cameras with sound will store about five days' worth of video and will be strong enough to withstand shock and vibration, Soukup said. They will be synchronized with the "black box" event data recorders already aboard trains.

There will be two cameras on each train, which will activate any time the trains are moving. Not only will they will record the scene in front of a train, but also behind, because Metra trains run in both directions in the course of the day.

The cameras will be able to capture a collision but the video may not be as graphic as one might imagine, because the cameras are placed high up on the engine.

"You will see if you hit somebody but you won't see the actual impact because of the height," Soukup said. In its test along the Rock Island Line, Metra's cameras captured events that engineers witness every day but that would shock many people, especially parents, officials said.

Efforts such as the international Operation Lifesaver program attempt to educate people about taking risks at rail crossings, but the videos captured by the cameras may be more effective. Videos of youths trespassing on tracks might help pinpoint areas near playgrounds or schools.

They may also put pressure on police to better enforce laws against pedestrians and vehicles ignoring gates and signals, he said.

"We're going to be able to go to the municipalities and say, 'Look, you're going to have to do better on your gate enforcement and your crossings. We have people [on tape] going around your gates.'"

rwronski@tribune.com

Copyright © 2006, [Chicago Tribune](#)