

# Working to make railroad crossings safer

By **Jeff Schenkel**  
Correspondent

**T**wo city councilmen from Pomona and El Monte — cities on opposite ends of the San Gabriel Valley — serve as members of the Alameda Corridor-East Construction Authority Board. They are working toward a common goal of making railroad crossings in the region safer, more efficient and more environmentally “green” than ever before.

The ACE Construction Authority was created in 1998 as a single-purpose construction authority by the San Gabriel Valley Council of Governments to mitigate the impacts of significant increases in rail traffic over 70 miles of railroad in the San Gabriel Valley.

Train traffic here is expected to increase by as much as 160 percent by the year 2020 as railroads continue to dramatically increase shipments from the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles through the San Gabriel Valley and on to the rest of the country.

ACE is building grade separations at 21 crossings and has completed safety enhancements at 39 crossings in an effort to minimize the effects of increased train traffic, which otherwise could create delays of up to 10 to 24 minutes at the busiest crossings — as often as every 20 minutes in some areas.

Side benefits to the construction effort include air quality improvements resulting from the elimination of 221 tons of pollution annually from cars and trucks idling at crossings. Noise will be significantly reduced throughout the San Gabriel Valley because locomotives will no longer be required to blow horns at grade separated crossings or where quad gates have been installed.

Pomona Councilman George Hunter represents his city serving as vice chair of the ACE board. He served on the Pomona Planning Commission before becoming a city councilman, making the planning

aspect of the ACE Board a natural for him.

He explained a grade separation involves taking a standard street-level railroad crossing and moving the street itself either over or under the tracks. Another approach, he added, is a train diversion, in which trains are re-routed to an area of less traffic.

Pomona is heavily impacted by the Alameda Corridor, Hunter said.

“In some places we have between three and four tracks that run through the center of our city,” he said. “You literally can’t get from the north side to the south side of the city so those are crucial issues for us.”

He said in addition to traffic flow and safety, he’s advocating a “quiet zone,” which would be the first in Los Angeles County if approved by the Federal Railroad Administration.

“We have trains that blow horns through four crossings in downtown that are not grade separated,” he said. “It is a major quality of life issue to have those train horns not blow.”

He added that the other advantage, of course, is that residents will be able to get around the city because of the grade separations.

“And they won’t be sitting at grade crossings and they won’t be creating pollution,” he said, adding that safety is a “huge issue” because there have been numerous accidents involving vehicles and trains.



El Monte Mayor Ernest Gutierrez, second from right, chairman of the ACE Board, explains the project to residents Rudy Blanco, from left, Sergio Zarur and Jorge Sifuentes. The photo at top shows the Ramona Boulevard project with the train above and the road below.



The four grade separations in Pomona include Reservoir Street, which was completed and opened to traffic last December; East End Avenue, which is under construction and expected to open next spring and Temple Avenue and Pomona Boulevard, from which train traffic will be diverted.

Hunter said Towne Avenue was originally the most easterly street in the city with a grade separation.

“Everybody heard trains and would shift to Towne,” he said. “That was the street you had to cut down.”

He said with the Reservoir Street undercrossing completed, motorists can choose between Towne and Reservoir.

Hunter said the project will create clear train-related safety benefits once it is completed, but the construction effort has placed an emphasis on safety as well.

“I know they did a lot of work getting information out to the kids — they went in and provided safety kits to the kids and provided videos so the kids could get the information they needed,” he said. “And the ACE staff worked closely with the school district on re-routing the traffic.”

He said ACE has invested a “huge amount of money in our city — nearly \$170 million on the grade separations and grade diversions.

“What’s left after we’re done is a very presentable, very pleasing design,” he said, “that hopefully enhances vehicle traffic and benefits everybody.”

El Monte built a grade separation at the railroad tracks on North Peck Road more than 20 years ago at a cost of about \$19 million in city, state and county funds after a number of tragedies involving either pedestrians or cars and trains.

El Monte Mayor Ernest Gutierrez, seeking his third term as mayor, and a councilman since 1982, has been chairman of the ACE Board for the past three years.

“Probably the most important benefit the city can derive is the safety of drivers and people that walk,” he said. “And you have your emergency units of police and firefighters and ambulances that need

to get where they need to get.”

But he said the environmental benefits are important as well.

“Any time that you have a vehicle moving it’s going to emit fewer pollutants so it is already a win-win situation,” he said, based on reduced idling at the crossings once the grade separations are completed. “And congestion is something on which we’re trying to take the lead in the state if not in the West. ACE helps cut congestion because when you didn’t have the underpass, you had to stop and (the trains) get longer and longer.

“It’s going to become a significant impact on people that are driving,” he added.

Gutierrez said El Monte’s Ramona Boulevard project is under construction and completion is expected in February. Plans call for the next underpass project to be at Baldwin Avenue.

He added that the Ramona project was possible without the need to acquire any homes, although several commercial properties were involved. He said the Baldwin Avenue project will involve acquiring commercial and residential properties.

“We’ve never had any problem with relocation of a single residence the entire six years I’ve been on the ACE board,” he said. “We haven’t had to go to litigation.”

What about the issue of noise and dust during construction?

“That’s pretty well taken care of,” he said, adding that guidelines call for water trucks to help control dust, for sound barrier blankets to be erected and for noise to be monitored and for other mitigation measures.



Sally Cortez, right, is joined by Pomona Councilman George Hunter at an April ceremony to unveil a plaque dedicating the Reservoir Street Grade Separation project in the memory of her late husband, former Pomona Mayor Edward Cortez.

And, he said, on the Baldwin project, the area adjacent to the underpass will become more attractive for redevelopment and the neighborhood will be quieter because locomotives will no longer be required to sound their horns.

“We have a number of industrial areas in the sites that are vacant and we’re looking at trying to get some high-end type of manufacturing or industrial uses there,” Gutierrez

said. “So it always helps to have those streets cleared.

“From the safety end of it, we are one of the safest cities in Southern California,” he said. “And the ACE project has not had any fatalities or serious injuries. They really run a safe operation.”

For more information, visit the ACE website at [www.theaceproject.org](http://www.theaceproject.org) or call (888) ACE-1426.

## Alameda Corridor-East

## San Gabriel Valley



Cars and trucks travel under a railroad bridge at the ACE Nogales Street grade separation project off the 60 freeway.

### The ACE Project:

- ❖ **Increases Safety**  
Construct railway-roadway separations at 21 crossings and safety enhancements at 39 crossings
- ❖ **Cuts Congestion**  
Eliminate train delays of up to 10 to 24 minutes at the busiest crossings
- ❖ **Improves Air Quality**  
Eliminate 221 tons of pollution annually by reducing traffic delays
- ❖ **Fosters Economic Vitality**  
Help preserve 192,000 new jobs in San Gabriel Valley

### Current Traffic Situation at Crossings



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