

MDOT Huron River Drive Fencing

Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers

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The Michigan Department of Transportation has proposed fencing between West Huron River Drive and the adjacent Michigan Line railroad tracks used primarily by Amtrak trains between Foster Bridge (Maple Road) and Barton Dam, a distance of approximately 1.5 miles. MDOT owns the Michigan Line at this location. Maple Road crosses the tracks at a signalized gated level crossing, and pedestrians and cyclists may also cross beneath the tracks at Barton Dam.

Many residents along West Huron Drive have objected to this fencing proposal, citing the reduction of those residents' access to the Huron River. Though there would be 1.5 miles of continuous fencing, that fence would not separate nearby residents from major recreational facilities or sever a link in non-motorized pathways. Very few people use the present unofficial railroad crossings, and a high percentage of those that do are observed to drive and park next to them.

MDOT has stated that this proposal is due to the danger that pedestrians face in such close proximity to fast passenger and freight trains. Numerous close calls and even deaths have occurred in the Ann Arbor area.

Objectors to the MDOT fencing plan say that the area in question has had few problematic encounters with trains. However, this position does not take into account the future construction of Segment G1 of the Border-to-Border (B2B) Trail in this location. Portions of this paved pedestrian/bicycle pathway are currently under construction or operational between Ann Arbor and Dexter.

Current plans are to fence the railroad right-of-way when it is adjacent to the B2B Trail. An example of this treatment is the operational segment west of Zeeb Road, several miles west of Foster Bridge. A similar segment now under construction east of Zeeb Road will also be fenced. The Washtenaw County Road Commission has responsibility for the current construction activity.

Another pedestrian/bicycle pathway is on the east side of Ann Arbor in Gallup Park along the Huron River. As a condition of building this park in the late 1960s, the New York Central railroad, which owned the Michigan Line at that time, insisted that the pathway and the roadway through that park be fenced along the railroad tracks for the safety of park users. That pathway has since been incorporated into the B2B Trail project.

The importance of separating members of the public, especially children, from an active railroad are illustrated by three pedestrian/bicycle underpasses constructed or proposed within the City of Ann Arbor. This first of these is the Allen Creek Berm underpass tunnel now in use. It is located on Depot Street next to the Amtrak Station. It connects the downtown with the recreational area at Argo Pond where it connects with the existing B2B Trail. It is widely used.

Another underpass soon to be constructed is the Barton-Bandemer Tunnel that will provide a major link in the B2B Trail to connect the present end of the Trail through Ann Arbor with the city park at Barton Dam by taking it safely beneath the Michigan Line. This will allow the rail line to be fenced where many close calls have been observed. The City of Ann Arbor has responsibility for this project in cooperation with other partners.

A third underpass now in the planning process would link the B2B Trail north of the tracks on the east side of Ann Arbor with the Nichols Arboretum operated by the University of Michigan near the Huron Towers apartment complex. The existing fence along the railroad tracks has frequently been cut by those wishing to cross the tracks in that vicinity, thus showing the need for a safe crossing alternative. This tunnel is also part of the University of Michigan North Campus Master Plan Update (2008).

These last two underpasses are expected to cost approximately \$5 million each.

The Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers endorses the following items:

Segment G1 of the Border-to-Border Trail should be fenced along the Michigan Line railroad between Foster Bridge (Maple Road) and Barton Dam as called for in the B2B Trail plan and as proposed by the Michigan Department of Transportation.

The Barton-Bandemer pedestrian/bicycle underpass should be constructed as soon as possible to provide a safe crossing beneath the Michigan Line to complete a missing link in the B2B Trail and to provide improved access between the north side of Ann Arbor and the recreational facilities west of Main Street.

Planning for the underpass to connect the B2B Trail, North Campus and the Gallup Park recreational area with the Nichols Arboretum, Medical Center and Central Campus should be completed and funding arranged.