



Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen

A Division of the Rail Conference of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters

Opinion: The rail threat

(The following column by Senator Joe Biden appeared on the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review website on October 21. Biden is a U.S. senator representing Delaware, a senior member of the Senate Judiciary Committee and a Democrat candidate for president.)

PITTSBURGH, Pa. — For more than 30 years, I've been a daily rail commuter from Wilmington, Del., into Washington, D.C.'s, Union Station. When I first started riding the train, we were, of course, still in a pre-9/11 world and we still held on to the notion that our oceans protected us from outside threats.

And now, putting it frankly, we should know better.

We've taken some important steps toward protecting our homeland. But we have done very little to protect perhaps the most widely targeted structures around the world -- rail systems.

Cynics argue that we can't protect everything. And given the vast number of targets here at home, that is unfortunately true. But we can and we must protect those areas terrorists are most likely to attack and those areas likely to cause the most damage.

Our rail systems are one area where action is desperately needed.

Greater Pittsburgh is a good example of where we need to look only to the not-so-distant past to know our rail yards and lines are vulnerable.

This time last October, close to two dozen ethanol tanker cars derailed and several exploded on a bridge in nearby New Brighton. The tanker cars burned for days and residents nearby saw and felt the explosion. Fortunately, no one was injured. But 500 residents were advised to evacuate their homes and cautioned about the water and air quality.

Because of the toxicity of the chemicals, investigators and firefighters were forced to stay away until the fire weakened.

What if this accident had occurred in downtown Pittsburgh?

Or worse -- what if this accident was purposeful, the result of terrorism?

Unfortunately, we know such a scenario is a distinct possibility and our trains are susceptible to sabotage.

A recent survey by the Teamsters' Rail Conference found that 32 percent of rail workers observed trespassers in the rail yards where they work. More than 50 percent of rail workers observed hazardous material shipments that were left unattended in the yard. Only 4 percent noticed a police presence in the yard.

The Trib's own investigative reporter, Carl Prine, has been looking at rail security threats in the years since 9/11. His reports amazed and frightened me. If Carl could stick his business card on tanker cars in some of the nation's biggest cities' rail yards, what would stop a terrorist from sticking plastique explosives on a chlorine tanker and remotely detonating it?

The Naval Research Laboratory has indicated that up to 100,000 people could be killed or injured this way.

The warning signs are all there. The bombings in London in 2005 and Madrid in 2004 are stark reminders that terrorists have made rail systems a primary target. Indeed, the FBI, the CIA and the 9/11 Commission have all warned us that our transportation infrastructure is penetrable.

At long last, the Congress has taken action and President Bush has signed into law legislation to implement the

recommendations of the 9/11 Commission. Among other provisions, the law will help local officials take simple but effective security measures -- adding lighting, fencing, closed-circuit televisions, police and bomb-sniffing dogs to our railway systems.

In addition, this law will require rail shipments of the most dangerous chemicals to be routed along the safest routes. Instead of letting rail companies make these determinations alone, the federal government will now have a role working with local officials and rail companies to determine the safest route for these deadly shipments.

These are good first steps. But we have more to do.

We learned a very hard lesson on 9/11 that terrorists are resourceful and seek to exploit our security loopholes. The problem then was that we never imagined we had such a loophole -- but there's no excuse now.

It took six years to finally pass comprehensive rail security legislation. Now, we need to invest -- just as we are doing with aviation security -- to ensure that the rail security reforms that we passed are put into place.

Last year, Greater Pittsburgh got an all-too-real warning of our rail-system vulnerability. We have enough warnings; it's time to make protecting our nation's rail systems a national priority.

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