

By Tom
Houlihan

Four large signs likely in efforts to warn truckers about Vollmer Road viaduct

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A standard tractor-trailer in Illinois is 13 feet, six inches high.

The Vollmer Road railroad viaduct, halfway between Western and Kedzie avenues, measures 11 feet, nine inches.

If you drive a large truck, those 21 inches are the difference between a clear shot toward Interstate 57 on Vollmer and having to find an alternate route with more room beneath the train tracks.

And, despite the best efforts of state and local officials to warn truckers before it's too late, many drivers continue to make the mistake of heading towards the viaduct, only to discover that 21-inch discrepancy. Some have hit the viaduct, or gotten stuck. Most require "motorist assistance" from the local police, which means they need help in turning around their rigs, a time-consuming process for police and other drivers on Vollmer.

Flossmoor police say they get those calls far too often, at least three times a month.

Flossmoor Village Manager Bridget Wachtel told village board members last week that four large signs are being considered in the latest attempt to let truckers know that they will never get through the Vollmer viaduct. She met recently with officials from Olympia Fields, Cook County, the Illinois Department of Transportation, Metra and CN Railroad. Wachtel said Olympia Fields, which recently received a \$300,000 state grant to be used to find a viaduct early warning system, is taking the lead on the latest efforts to find a solution so that truckers look for a route other than Vollmer Road.

The four cantilever signs would be about as big as those found on interstate highways, Wachtel said. Two would be placed on Vollmer, east of Western and west of Kedzie respectively. The others would be on Kedzie just north of Vollmer and on Western just south of Vollmer.

The state and county are expected to help with funding for the signs, she said, and it is likely they will be installed sometime in 2016.

Wachtel told the H-F Chronicle last week that the viaduct truck problems are, first and foremost, a public safety issue.

“When trucks get stuck down there, police have to respond and they are tied up for a long time,” she said. “That impacts our ability to respond to other emergencies. A lot of resources go toward dealing with trucks at the viaduct.”

Flossmoor shares jurisdiction over Vollmer Road with Olympia Fields. Flossmoor police are in charge of calls on the westbound lane and Olympia Fields has jurisdiction over the eastbound lane. There is little space for turning around either on the east or west side of the viaduct.

To further complicate matters, Wachtel said some drivers are relying on the wrong GPS information when approaching Western or Kedzie.

“GPS for truckers will indicate that they should avoid Vollmer Road,” she said. “But some drivers rely on GPS that is meant for cars, or even the directions on their phone.” Several trucking firms are located in the Chicago Heights area, she said, and their drivers are just looking for a good way to get to the interstate.

A long-term solution to the viaduct problem would probably involve a reconstruction of Vollmer Road and the underpass, Wachtel said.

“That won’t happen for many years,” she said.

Flossmoor Police Chief Michael Pulec said truck accidents at the viaduct have decreased since Cook County put up additional warning signs last year. Still, Flossmoor police have responded to calls at the viaduct nearly 400 times since 2010.

This year, to date, there have been 38 motorist assists at the underpass and one truck versus viaduct accident. In 2010, there were 15 crashes and 124 motorist assists. There were 47 viaduct calls in 2011, 76 in 2012, 76 in 2013 and 40 in 2014.

Pulec said his tally of the incidents does not take into account calls that would have been handled by Olympia Fields.

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