

Wairarapa Level Crossing changes – Frequently Asked Questions

What work are you doing in the Wairarapa Line?

Wairarapa Line work is part of the Wellington Metro Upgrade Programme, a \$700 million programme of works designed to build a more reliable, modern and resilient railway across the wider Wellington region.

The Wairarapa Line is aging. KiwiRail is in the process of replacing existing tracks, sleepers, bridges and making improvements that will support the introduction of new, more frequent trains on the line. This work will also remove speed restrictions on the line, so commuters will experience faster journey times. This is a once in a generation investment in the Wairarapa Line. Work started in late 2021, some of it is happening now and work will continue until to 2026.

Safety is a key component of this work. In addition to building better track infrastructure that can safely handle more and faster commuter trains, KiwiRail also has to reassess the safety of level crossings on the Wairarapa Line.

Why do you have to close level crossings on the Wairarapa Line?

Greater Wellington Regional Council is investing in new hybrid trains that will be able to offer more frequent commuter services between the Wairarapa and Wellington. At the same time, KiwiRail's track upgrade work will allow trains to travel faster.

To allow more frequent trains, KiwiRail has to reassess safety on the line and submit proposed changes (to ensure safety in the context of more frequent trains) to the rail regulator NZ Transport Agency / Waka Kotahi. This is a variation to the Wairarapa Line's existing Safety Case.

Level crossings present a documented risk to pedestrians and vehicles. That risk increases as we start to run more trains more often and at faster speeds.

By international standards, there are too many level crossings on the Wairarapa Line – with 30 crossings along the 45km length of line between the end of the Remutaka Tunnel and Masterton. This is an average of one crossing every 1.5km, with some crossings as little as 200m apart. In comparison, the 30km Hutt Valley Line (Wellington - Upper Hutt) has three road level crossings.

In the Masterton district there are six level crossings, in the Carterton district there are 17 level crossings – with five of them in a 1.1-kilometre stretch of line – and in the South Wairarapa district there are seven level crossings.

To improve safety, we expect to upgrade the majority of the level crossings so that they will all have barrier arms, flashing lights and warning bells. This helps reduce risk.

However, the best way to remove risk is to close level crossings. Given the high number of level crossings on the line, some have to be closed.

Why did you do a wider regional study?

KiwiRail's safety assessments of level crossings, which led to our upgrade/closure proposal in May 2023, were based on the safety characteristics of individual level crossings, factoring in other considerations – such as whether there are viable alternative routes in the case of closure.

In May we proposed closing seven level crossings across the Wairarapa and upgrading the other 23.

The community called for a better understanding of the safety risk across the region, a better understanding of traffic impacts, and clarification of the criteria the rail regulator NZTA uses when assessing safety cases.

We committed to undertaking a new, region-wide study.

Aurecon and JMDR (consulting engineers and rail specialists respectively) were commissioned to undertake this work, which will be used as evidence for the Safety Case. The study (or route review) is a risk-based assessment that evaluates road and rail safety, community amenity, road network effects and the economic benefits of upgrading level crossings versus closure.

What did the regional study find?

The study, which was completed in February 2024, found:

- **The study recommended closing five level crossings and upgrading 25 crossings.**
- **This includes closing Judds Road, Masterton, unless roading changes can be made to remove the short-stacking risk.** The rail upgrade project is not funded to carry out this work. KiwiRail will aim to leave closure work on the Judds Road crossing to last, allowing approximately six months for the Masterton District Council to consider requesting funding.
- Two of the recommended crossing closures are in Carterton and are necessary, due to the high number of crossings in that area. KiwiRail had previously proposed closing the Pembroke St level crossing, but the study did not recommend this.

Does Judds Rd level crossing in Masterton have to close?

The regional study found Judds Rd will have to close unless roading changes can be made.

This crossing has short stacking issues – where a long vehicle is unable to safely clear the level crossing when stopping at the adjacent road intersection. This is a significant safety risk.

Eliminating the short stacking risk will be a vital element of the safety case variation that is required to implement more frequent commuter train timetable on the Wairarapa Line.

After discussions with community representatives and the Masterton District Council, KiwiRail has assisted in drafting some potential road layout changes that could reduce some of the risk associated with crossing.

KiwiRail is not funded to undertake this work, so alternate funding would be required.

We plan to carry out the Judds Rd level crossing closure last, allowing time for the Masterton District Council to look at funding for roading upgrades.

Why has the regional study recommended closing fewer level crossings?

The study considers a wider range of factors than KiwiRail would normally be required to take into account. These include community amenity, road network effects and the economic benefits of upgrading level crossings versus closure. KiwiRail's work is normally focused on improvements to discrete level crossings; in the case of the improvements we are making to the Wairarapa's rail connection, there is a unique opportunity to look at a much wider perspective.

Why does the study say Revans St, Featherston could be closed in the future?

As a state highway, Revans St (SH53) closure would involve significant roading changes, which means it has been deemed impractical for KiwiRail to close this crossing, however there is opportunity for NZTA to consider closure of this as part of their long term roading strategy.

Why would you close Fox St instead of Bell St in South Wairarapa?

Either crossing could be closed but the South Wairarapa District Council proposed closing Fox St in its district plan.

What is your timeline for undertaking the level crossing work?

We will start level crossing work in April 2024, with civil works expected to be completed in early 2025. Signalling work (installing and wiring up the barrier arms, etc) at the crossings is expected to take into 2026.

We will start on the southern level crossings (South Wairarapa), progressively moving north. The Judds Rd level crossing will be left till last.

Can you guarantee that only five level crossings in the Wairarapa will be closed?

If the rail regulator (NZ Transport Agency / Waka Kotahi) accepts KiwiRail's proposal, then the crossing closures will be limited to those identified. The Rail Regulator's assessment will be undertaken just prior to the new trains coming into service (when the safety case is formally submitted) so they will consider their response at this time. We cannot foresee what might occur over the coming four to five years that could influence a change in thinking, but we are committed to working closely with the Rail Regulator so they are well informed on our proposed plan and they can communicate any regulatory changes to us as they come to light.

KiwiRail must develop a proposal to ensure rail safety on the Wairarapa Line, to allow more frequent commuter train services to run and submit this as a variation to the Wairarapa Line's existing safety case.

This safety case variation will be based on international best practice, which will include the crossing safety improvements and closures.

NZTA can reject the variation, which may require further crossing closures. The safety case variation will be submitted before the new trains arrive in 2028/9.

Are level crossings closing anywhere else in New Zealand?

International best practice is to close level crossings, wherever practical.

There is a requirement to remove all level crossings across the Auckland metro network to improve safety.

Like the Wairarapa, this is to enable more frequent trains than there currently are across the city, when the City Rail Link (CRL) opens.

CRL will enable commuter services in the city to double, over time. Though on a much smaller scale, the new hybrid trains on the Wairarapa Line will also double the current number of peak services and introduce more inter-peak services.

What is KiwiRail's criteria for assessing which level crossings to close?

International rail best practice is to remove all road level crossings – completely removing the risk of collisions with vehicles.

This means, to leave crossings open we have to demonstrate that it is not reasonably practical to close them.

When considering level crossing closures, we look at a range of criteria:

- Individual crossing safety profile (done to the international LCSIA and LCAM standards). Short stacking, for example, makes a crossing particularly unsafe.
- The viability of closure – a number of the crossings in the Wairarapa region have to remain open because there are either no alternative road routes, the alternative would significantly lengthen journey times, or the level crossing closure would significantly disrupt traffic flows.

Closing any level crossing impacts traffic, but some have a major effect. Reflected in our original proposal, some crossings were to remain open at councils' request because those roads are major traffic routes. KiwiRail has also been engaging with NZTA, as Local Roding Authority responsible for SH2, around impacts on traffic flows.

What is NZTA's criteria for approving a safety case?

KiwiRail has primary responsibility for assessing safety at level crossings and proposing changes to manage risk, in the context of more frequent trains running on the Wairarapa Line, for the Safety Case variation.

NZTA, as rail regulator, has an oversight role – checking that our level crossing proposals (upgrades or closures) will ensure an acceptable level of safety on the line, so far as is reasonably practical.

NZTA is working with us as we do our regional study.

How many rail collisions have there been in the Wairarapa?

Collisions at level crossings on the Wairarapa Line over the last decade:

Date	Level Crossing	Incident
17/2/2013	Wiltons Road, Carterton District	Ute collided with train
18/10/2013	Andersons Line, Carterton District	Car collided with train
21/2/2014	Fox St, Featherston	Car collided with train (while overtaking bus)
1/2/2016	Western Lake Rd, South Wairarapa	Car collided with train
5/9/2017	Kent St, Carterton	Car collided with train
20/10/2017	Norman Ave, Carterton District	Heavy vehicle collided with train
7/1/2020	Hodders Rd, Carterton District	Car collided with train
28/1/2021	Western Lake Rd, South Wairarapa	Car collided with train
27/3/2022	Pembroke St, Carterton	Car collided with train
31/12/2022	Matarawa Rd, Carterton District	Heavy vehicle collided with train
21/7/2023	Norfolk Rd, Carterton District	Car collided with train

Why do you want to close level crossings where there haven't been any collisions / or leaving crossings open where there have been collisions?

KiwiRail safety standards and the safety case variation are about the potential risk of collision across the region, in the context of more frequent trains running on the line.

Though more than 70 per cent of collisions in the last decade have been in the Carterton District, our level crossing changes are not focussed on specific crossings where there have been collisions in the past. The total number of crossings in the Wairarapa is itself a safety risk.

Some crossings where there have previously been collisions cannot be closed – given there are no alternative routes (for example, in the case of Andersons Line, Hodders Rd and Matarawa Rd) or closures would significantly impact traffic flows.

All crossings that remain open will be upgraded with improved safety features, which will help reduce the risk of future collisions.

Won't closing road level crossings increase transport emissions – given people will need to take detours and travel further?

The entire reason for the safety improvements on the Wairarapa Line is to allow more frequent commuter services between the Wairarapa and Wellington, and across the Wairarapa region.

More frequent, faster and convenient journeys will encourage more people to make use of rail public transport within the region and for the longer journey into Wellington. This will create significant emissions savings long term.

Why is it OK to close road crossings but leave pedestrian crossings open?

The controls for pedestrians and vehicles are very different. Where a road crossing may see some drivers navigate their way around barriers, the pedestrian crossings are fully fenced with automatic gates that close across the entire crossing.