

# UTC News & Views

UTC News & Views is a consumer publication of the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission.

## Approximately every two hours, a person or a vehicle is struck by a train in the United States

Operation Lifesaver, Inc., the national, non-profit, rail safety program wants to help summer travelers with simple precautions to take when walking near or driving across railroad tracks.



As summer travel season begins, Operation Lifesaver offers these safety tips to drivers and pedestrians who may not have train tracks near their homes, but find themselves around railroad tracks and trains while on vacation.

Operation Lifesaver's "Top Ten" safety pointers include:

1. Trains are everywhere. Freight, passenger, commuter, and light rail trains are found in both densely populated cities and rural locations.
2. Always expect a train. Trains can run on any track, at any time, in either direction.
3. Cross only at designated locations. The only safe and legal place to be on a railroad track is at a designated crossing -- and even there it is important to stay alert and follow directions.
4. Don't rely on track vibration. Modern technology means that you can not hear or feel an oncoming train in time to clear the tracks safely.
5. Never go around a lowered crossing gate or through the flashing lights. These devices indicate that an oncoming train is imminent. If you suspect the gate is malfunctioning, call the railroad using the toll free emergency notification

number posted at the crossing or call local law enforcement.

6. Trains are wider than their tracks. To ensure clearance and to protect yourself from flying debris, always stand or stop at least 15 feet from the track.
7. Trains can't stop or swerve like cars. It can take a freight train traveling 55 miles per hour more than a mile to stop.
8. You cannot gauge the speed of an approaching train. An optical illusion caused by their large mass (freight trains average 12 million pounds) makes trains seem to be moving more slowly than they actually are.
9. Don't get caught on the tracks. Before driving across tracks, be sure there is room on the other side to completely clear both the tracks and the train's overhang.
10. If you stall, get out and get away. Move everyone out of the car and away from the tracks, even if you do not see a train approaching. Call the toll free emergency number posted near the crossing or your local police immediately.

In 2006, according to preliminary U.S. government statistics, there were 2,908 automobile collisions at railroad crossings across America, 366 motorists lost their lives, and 997 people were injured or killed across the United States while walking or playing on the railroad right-of-way.

Operation Lifesaver's mission is to end collisions, deaths and injuries at highway-rail grade crossings and on rail property. It has a nationwide network of volunteers who work to educate people about rail safety. For more information about the organization, log on to Washington Operation Lifesaver at [www.utc.wa.gov/waol](http://www.utc.wa.gov/waol) or the national Operation Lifesaver web site at [www.oli.org](http://www.oli.org).

Bob Boston  
State Coordinator – Washington Operation Lifesaver

## The Utilities and Transportation headquarters in Olympia is now in the Richard Hemstad Building

No, we didn't move.



On May 17, the UTC held a ceremony to dedicate its building to

Richard Hemstad, who served as a commissioner from 1993 to 2005. Among his many accomplishments, he was elected to the state Senate in 1980 and served one term, and was the first director of the Office of Community Development. After receiving his law degree from the University of Chicago, he moved to Seattle in 1957 to join a law firm. He moved to Olympia in 1967 to serve as legal counsel for former Governor Dan Evans.

Many distinguished guests helped dedicate the building, including members of the Hemstad family and UTC staff. Current UTC Chairman Mark Sidran opened the ceremony. Other speakers included Secretary of State Sam Reed, former Secretary of State Ralph Munro, former Governor Dan Evans, former UTC Chairwoman Marilyn Showalter, UTC Senior Policy Advisor Dick Byers and UTC Commissioner Patrick Oshie.

Richard Hemstad retired in February 2005, and passed away on December 12 of the same year. The UTC misses him. We are proud to work in the building that bears his name.

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## How to Avoid Being Slammed

Having your telephone company changed without your permission is on the rise. This practice is known as slamming. Most consumers and small businesses who are slammed don't realize it until they get their telephone bill.

Slamming happens in many ways. It used to be limited to long distance service, however, now as competition expands to local toll and basic phone service, the UTC is seeing more slamming complaints. Some consumers find their long distance and local toll service have been slammed at the same time!

By following these simple tips, you can protect yourself from slamming:

- If you get a telemarketing call for new telephone service, **be careful**. Make sure you know what you are agreeing to before you say, "yes." **If you get transferred to a "verifier", that means your service is going to be switched or changed if you say yes to the verifier's questions.**
- **Ask questions** before you agree to change your long distance or local toll service to a different company. Make sure you understand what you are agreeing to.
- Ask the telemarketer to send you written material about the offer and an authorization form so you can **check out the details** before making a decision.
- If you get an offer in the mail, **read all the material** before returning the authorization form. Many offers include incentives like bonus checks, free calling card or long distance minutes, raffle entries and other contests. Before accepting an offer, make sure you understand the rates, terms and conditions of the service that comes with it.
- Slamming frequently occurs when a company calls and offers to consolidate all of your telephone services on one bill. Sounds good, but most consumers and small businesses already get one bill from their local telephone company that includes their local, local toll, and long distance charges.
- Periodically **check your long distance company** by dialing 1+700+555-4141 and **your local toll company** by calling your local phone provider.
- Call your local telephone company and ask them not to change your long distance or local toll company unless they receive a written or verbal **authorization** from you. This protects you from unscrupulous telemarketers who are attempting to switch your service.
- If you are slammed, **know your rights**. The easiest way to lodge a complaint and switch back to your preferred company is to call your local telephone company. In most cases, you will get your service switched back at

no charge, and have your calls re-billed by the company that slammed you, at the rates of your original carrier.

If you believe you have been slammed, please contact the UTC Consumer Affairs section at 1-800-562-6150.

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## Privately-owned Electric Company Customers Lose Credit

Residential and small-farm customers of Avista, Pacific Power and Puget Sound Energy will lose a federal power system credit starting June 7. Customers have benefited for years from the Residential Exchange Program credits received as a pass-through by the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA). BPA stopped making payments to the utility companies in response to a recent federal court ruling that the formula BPA used to distribute federal power benefits to customers of northwest private utilities violated federal law. The privately-owned electric companies have not increased the amount they charge for electricity, however, without the credit, customers will see higher bills. The UTC has joined the utility commissions in Oregon, Idaho and Montana to ask the U.S. Justice Department to allow BPA to seek rehearing of the case.

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## Are You Moving This Summer?

The UTC's Business Practices Investigations (BP) Section recommends that consumers should do their homework before hiring a company to move their household goods. BP looks at all kinds of consumer complaints. When a company shows a pattern of bad behavior, it conducts a formal investigation of the company. Some of BP investigations have resulted in:

- An illegal mover was fined \$1,500, and told to stop operating without a permit.
- One moving company was issued a penalty for more than \$92,000 for improper customer charges.
- Another moving company was penalized more than \$69,000 for charging the wrong rates, failing to process customers' damage claims, and for using improper forms.

## How Do I Find a Good Moving Company?

While most moving companies are reputable and will do a good job, the BP section recommends the following tips when hiring a moving company:

1. **Use a mover who has a Utilities and Transportation Commission (UTC) permit.** Check with the commission to make sure the company you are considering has a moving permit. Licensed movers must provide damage coverage for your goods, so if something goes wrong, UTC staff can help you resolve your complaint. Call the UTC Consumer Affairs Information Line at 1-800-562-6150 or visit [www.utc.wa.gov/consumer/movingtips](http://www.utc.wa.gov/consumer/movingtips) to get information on a moving company or file a complaint.
2. **Read all documents carefully.** State law requires that movers provide customers with a written contract that lists all of the costs for your move and outlines the damage claim reimbursement choices. Read and understand every document before you sign it!  
  
If the company can't or won't answer your questions, get another company!
3. **Plan Ahead.**
  - Prepare in advance. Take your time. Waiting until the last minute to hire a moving company may cost you more money.
  - You have the right to a written estimate of the costs for your move BEFORE your move. You never have to pay more than 125% of the written estimate. For example, if your estimate is \$1000, you would never have to pay more than \$1250. Without a written estimate the company may charge you whatever they want.
  - **READ: Your Rights and Responsibilities as a Moving Company Customer.** This is a UTC publication that gives you advice on how to work with your moving company and what your rights are. You can get a copy of this brochure from any household goods moving company, the UTC, or you may read it online by going to our website at [www.utc.wa.gov/consumer/movingtips](http://www.utc.wa.gov/consumer/movingtips).

## It's that time of year again!



The time of year when many of us are out working in our yard --mowing, trimming, cutting and creating yard

waste. Many local garbage companies have yard waste programs, so you don't have to haul those trimmings to your local landfill or transfer station yourself. The garbage company will provide you a container, most likely a 90 gallon covered bin on wheels, and all you have to do is put your yard waste in it and set it out for pickup on the appropriate day.

Yard waste programs are designed to reduce the amount of waste sent to the transfer stations or landfills. Not every city or county has a yardwaste program so you need to contact your local garbage company to see if they have such a program.

The program may be voluntary or it may even be required by the local (city or county) government. If it is required, you will be billed for the service regardless of whether you choose to use it or not. Generally, you can expect to receive a yard waste pickup every other week.

Yard waste materials can mean, but not be limited to:

- leaves, brush, tree trimmings, grass clippings, weeds, shrubs
- waste from vegetable gardens
- compostable organic materials that result from landscape pruning and yard maintenance

Branches or roots should be smaller than four inches in diameter, and fit within the closed container.

Yard waste does not include stumps, demolition wood, large amounts of dirt, rocks, glass, plastics, metal, concrete, sheetrock, asphalt, or any other non-organic land clearing debris. In many areas, yard waste cannot include any food or kitchen

waste. If you put out a yard waste bin containing any of these materials, and they are not allowed in your area, you can expect your garbage hauler to refuse to pickup your container. Check with your garbage hauler before including food or kitchen waste.

Contact your local garbage company and ask if it has a yard waste program. If you don't have to haul away all that debris yourself, you might have more time to relax in your yard!

### Come Visit Us...

At the Puyallup Fair! September 21<sup>st</sup> is Government Day at the fair so stop by our booth and say 'hi'! Find out who we are, what we do, and how we can help you with utility issues. Our booth is on the first floor of the Pavilion so keep an eye out for us! We'll be handing out goodie bags, and lots of smiles. ☺



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