Railroad Crossing Bicycle Accidents in Georgia

Why Railroad Tracks Are Among the Most Dangerous Surfaces Georgia Cyclists Encounter

Georgia's railroad infrastructure cuts through virtually every city, town, and rural corridor in the state. The freight rail network that serves the Port of Savannah, Atlanta's intermodal hubs, and thousands of industrial facilities runs on tracks that cross tens of thousands of roads, greenways, and multi-use paths, many of them in conditions that bicycle riders have no way to anticipate. Unlike a pothole or a patch of gravel, a set of railroad tracks oriented at the wrong angle to a cyclist's direction of travel can catch a front wheel in a fraction of a second and throw the rider before any reaction is possible.

At the Law Offices of Gary Martin Hays & Associates, P.C., our Georgia bicycle accident lawyers have investigated bicycle crash claims involving railroad crossings where the hazard was the track angle itself, the deteriorated surface between the rails, or the absence of any warning that a crossing existed ahead. These cases involve a distinct legal analysis because the responsible party may not be the cyclist or any motor vehicle driver. It may be the railroad company, a government entity, or both.

We've recovered over $1 billion for Georgia families, and our attorneys bring the same disciplined investigation to railroad crossing bicycle crashes that we apply to every serious injury claim.

The Engineering Problem at Most Georgia Rail Crossings

Railroad tracks create a physical hazard for cyclists that the road surface around them doesn't. A bicycle tire is narrow, typically 23 to 35 millimeters wide on a road bike, and when that tire contacts a gap in the pavement that matches its width at an angle that doesn't allow the tire to roll cleanly across, the tire drops into the gap. At even moderate speeds, the wheel stops while the rest of the bike and rider continue forward. The result is an immediate, uncontrolled dismount.

The geometry of the crossing relative to the cyclist's direction of travel is the single most important factor. A cyclist crossing tracks perpendicularly, at or near 90 degrees, can usually roll across without incident if the track surface is well maintained. A cyclist crossing at an acute angle, such as tracks that run diagonally across a road the cyclist is traveling parallel to, or a rail-to-trail conversion where the old right-of-way angle creates a shallow crossing, faces the highest risk of wheel capture.

A typical scenario looks like this: a recreational cyclist is riding west on a designated bike route in Savannah's historic district and approaches a set of freight rail tracks that cross the street at roughly a 25-degree angle. There's no signage warning cyclists to cross at a right angle, no rubberized crossing surface to reduce the gap, and no pavement marking indicating the track hazard. The cyclist crosses at a shallow angle, the front wheel drops into the groove between

the flange and the rail, and the bike stops while the rider goes over the handlebars, striking the pavement headfirst.

Track Conditions That Elevate Crossing Hazard for Georgia Cyclists:

- **Acute Crossing Angle Relative To Travel Direction:** Any crossing where the track runs at less than 45 degrees to the cyclist's path creates a dangerous wheel-capture geometry. Georgia's older rail corridors, many of which predate bicycle infrastructure planning, are particularly prone to this configuration where roads and trails follow historical paths that didn't account for cycling.
- **Deteriorated Flange Gap And Rail Surface:** The gap between the inside of the rail and the road surface, called the flange way, must be maintained within specific tolerances. When the flange way widens due to deferred maintenance, it can capture bicycle tires regardless of the crossing angle. Georgia's freight-heavy rail network experiences heavy vibration loading that accelerates flange way deterioration.
- **Missing Or Inadequate Rubberized Crossing Panels:** Modern railroad crossings serving high-pedestrian or high-bicycle traffic areas typically include rubberized panels that fill the flange gaps and reduce tire capture risk. When those panels are missing, cracked, or heaved by ground movement, the protective benefit disappears.
- **Absence Of Warning Signs Or Pavement Markings:** Cyclists descending a hill, rounding a curve, or riding in unfamiliar terrain may not identify a rail crossing in time to adjust their approach angle. Georgia bicycle facility design standards call for advance warning and approach-angle guidance at crossings with acute geometries, but many existing crossings predate those standards.
- **Poor Surface Condition Between The Rails:** The road or path surface between parallel rails and immediately adjacent to the outside rail is often degraded by the vibration and weight of passing trains. Broken asphalt, sunken pavement, and loose gravel in the crossing zone all increase crash risk for cyclists approaching at any angle.

The Federal Railroad Administration maintains national standards for highway-rail grade crossing safety and tracks crossing inventory data. Georgia's highway-rail grade crossings are catalogued in that system, and maintenance deficiencies are documented in inspection records that become discoverable evidence in litigation.

Who Is Responsible for a Railroad Crossing Bicycle Crash in Georgia?

The legal question of who bears liability for a railroad crossing bicycle crash requires identifying which entity had the duty to maintain the crossing in a reasonably safe condition and whether that entity failed to perform its duty.

Potentially Responsible Parties:

- **The Railroad Company:** Railroad companies have a duty to maintain the crossings on their tracks in a condition that doesn't create unreasonable hazards for lawful users of the crossing. That duty includes maintaining flange way tolerances, ensuring crossing panels are intact, and providing adequate warning systems. When a railroad's deferred

maintenance created the flange gap or deteriorated surface that caught a cyclist's tire, the railroad bears direct liability.

- **The Georgia Department of Transportation Or Local Government:** Georgia has a federally funded railroad crossing improvement program administered through the Georgia Department of Transportation. When a crossing has been flagged for improvement, when government funds were available for warning device upgrades, or when GDOT approved a crossing design that created a known bicycle hazard, state or local liability may be implicated alongside the railroad's.
- **A Trail Or Greenway Managing Authority:** Georgia's expanding network of multi-use trails frequently crosses railroad rights-of-way. When a trail authority designed or maintained a crossing in a way that failed to warn cyclists of the acute-angle hazard or failed to provide a widened crossing pad to allow perpendicular approach, that authority may be responsible for crashes attributable to the design.
- **A Property Developer Or Road Designer:** New road construction and subdivision development sometimes creates crossings with dangerous geometries when the road layout doesn't account for existing track orientation. Engineering errors in road design that produce acute crossing angles may expose the designer and the property owner to liability.

Injuries From Rail Crossing Bicycle Crashes

The injury pattern in a rail crossing crash depends largely on the cyclist's speed and the specific mechanics of the fall. A high-speed wheel-capture crash that throws the rider over the handlebars typically produces head and neck impact against the pavement. Traumatic brain injuries are a primary risk, with or without helmet use, because the forward rotational force of the over-the-handlebar fall can exceed helmet protection limits. Road rash from bicycle accidents at rail crossings on rough asphalt or gravel produces deep abrasions that require wound care and may cause permanent scarring.

Fractures to the collarbone, wrist, and shoulder from instinctive bracing against impact are extremely common in forward ejection crashes. When the crash is severe and the rider's head contacts the rail or the raised edge of a deteriorated crossing panel, skull fractures and intracranial bleeding may result. Children who crash at railroad crossings face additional developmental risks from traumatic brain injuries that affect their educational and neurological progress for years.

Wrongful death claims following fatal rail crossing bicycle crashes are governed by Georgia's wrongful death statute, and the liability framework that applies to serious injury cases applies equally to fatalities. The railroad company's failure to maintain a safe crossing is the same negligent act whether the victim survives or does not.

The Legal Argument Starts at the Crossing

Railroad crossing bicycle crash litigation centers on a single question: was the crossing in a condition that a reasonably maintained, properly warned crossing would have prevented this crash? That question is answered with engineering evidence, maintenance records, crossing

inspection logs, federal safety data, and specialist testimony about bicycle physics at different approach angles and speeds.

Our attorneys obtain federal crossing inventory records, request maintenance histories under Georgia's open records laws, and retain bicycle crash reconstruction professionals who can document the precise geometry and surface conditions that caused the fall. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and Federal Railroad Administration data we obtain form the evidentiary spine of these cases, and the railroad companies' own crossing inspection records often provide the most damaging evidence of what they knew and failed to fix.

Contact us as soon as possible after a railroad crossing bicycle crash in Georgia. Cyclists and families we represent owe nothing unless we win because our firm works on a contingency-fee basis, and every fee we earn comes from the recoveries we secure for our clients.