

Railroad Horn Quiet Zone – FAQ

GENERAL QUESTIONS

Q1) Why is the City of Vancouver even considering quiet zones? The railroad was here long before the residents.

A1) The City, at the request of many residents located adjacent to the railroad tracks, initiated several quiet zone feasibility studies in response to many complaints. The Federal Railroad Administration's Train Horn Rule allows communities to improve the livability of their neighborhood by elimination of this very loud source of noise. Transportation Services' role is to provide support to the residents to investigate the feasibility of quieting the horns.

Q2) Why can't the railroad simply require their engineers to be more consistent and respectful in their use of train horns?

A2) The City does not have authority over railroad horn use. With the Federal Railroad Administration's Train Horn Rule (adopted in June 2005), train horn use should be more consistent because the duration of the horn blast should be 15-20 seconds long starting ¼ mile before the crossing and lasting until the locomotive clears the crossing. The minimum sound level for a train is 92 dBA and the maximum is 110 dBA, 100 feet in front of the train.

Q3) Are the improvements being proposed to lower liability risk for the railroad and the City?

A3) No, both the railroad and City feel the train horns adequately address the liability risk at railroad grade crossings. The proposed new gates are directly related to establishing a quiet zone, not to address a safety risk. The 4-gate systems are not required. Several gate configurations were assessed including way-side horns, one-way loops and street closures. The 4-gate configuration provides the quietest and least restrictive measures for the residents, while still maintaining safety at the public crossing at or above the use of train horns.

Q4) Why doesn't the City establish a "whistle ban"?

A4) New whistle bans cannot be established under the Federal Railroad Administration's Train Horn Rule. The FRA's study of existing whistle bans without supplemental safety measures has noted a significant increase in train collisions at crossings.

Q5) How will the train horn quiet zone affect safety at private crossings?

A5) The elimination of routine horn noise will require greater care when crossing a private crossing in close proximity to a public crossing. Additional signs will be installed at the private crossings to heighten awareness of the railroad crossing.

Q6) How much train horn use will still occur if the quiet zone is established?

A6) The quiet zone will not eliminate all horn use but should have a profound impact on train horn noise. The quiet zone will only address horn use associated with routine warnings at crossings but with over forty trains a day required to blast their horn for 15-20 seconds, it will eliminate a vast majority of horn use, particularly late at night. It does not restrict horn use for emergencies or as a warning to miscellaneous activities near the tracks, in which cases the horn use would be infrequent and would not require a long horn blast.

Q7) When may a train blow its horn in a quiet zone?

A7) It is based on the judgment of the engineer. If pedestrians are near the tracks or a vehicle is on the tracks, they will their horn. BNSF does not have a policy to use their horn if a car is waiting to cross at a private crossing.

Q8) If BNSF continues to blow their horn, what can be done?

A8) The Federal Rail Administration will investigate reports of misuse and potentially fine engineers that violate the train horn rule.

Q9) What can be done to address horn noise in the area along the tracks between the proposed central and east quiet zones?

A9) All the crossings in this area are private. The quiet zone rules only apply to public crossings. With the adoption of the train horn rule, residents will be able to contact FRA about train horn overuse.

Q10) Why can't the trains' horns be automated to eliminate excessive horn use by the railroad engineer?

A10) This is decision for the owner of the train engines. The City of Vancouver does not have authority to change the hardware on the trains. Automatic (wayside horns) can be installed at gated crossings.

FINANCING / LOCAL IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT (LID) QUESTIONS

Q1) Will the cost of improvements be distributed proportionately to the benefited parties?

A1) Yes. State law which regulates establishment of Local Improvement Districts (LID) requires that those participants receive adequate benefit and the costs are distributed proportionate to benefit.

Q2) What percent of participants are necessary to approve the creation of a LID?

A2) Using the petition method to form a Location Improvement District, Washington State law specifies a simple majority (50% plus 1).

Q3) Has the City checked into getting a grant to pay for the crossing improvements?

A3) Yes, City staff has explored various grants and other funding opportunities, but nothing is available.

Q4) What will it cost to maintain proposed crossing gates?

A4) Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) quotes a cost of \$5,000 per quad gate crossing per year for maintenance. It is not a flat fee and will fluctuate over time based on the total maintenance needs/effort. The City will be charged a time and materials cost, which will be billed to residents within the Quiet Zone boundary on a pro-rata per-lot basis. The time and materials maintenance cost has been estimated at approximately \$5,000 per year per crossing. This is a conservative estimate, yet will vary over time.

EASTERN TRAIN HORN QUIET ZONE QUESTIONS

Q1) Why can't Steamboat Landing and Rivershore Drive be classified as "Private," thus relieving BNSF the requirement to blow their horn?

A1) Because the Steamboat Landing entrance provides access to a commercial dock, it must be treated as a public crossing. In general, all the public crossings are too busy to be without gates or horn use.

ACRONYM LIST

BNSF = Burlington Northern Santa Fe
FRA = Federal Railroad Administration
LID = Local Improvement District
SSM = Supplementary Safety Measure