



# CITY OF SAN MATEO

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## Agenda Report

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**TO:** City Council

**FROM:** Drew Corbett, City Manager

**PREPARED BY:** Public Works Department

**MEETING DATE:** June 20, 2023

**SUBJECT:**  
Train Horn Noise – Status Update

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Receive a presentation on the status of efforts to minimize train horn noise impacts and provide feedback.

**BACKGROUND:**

Minimizing impacts to residents from train horn noise at City at-grade crossings has been a top priority for City Council. In 2017, staff investigated the possibility of establishing a “Quiet Zone” within the City’s limits and presented information on possible approaches to Council in August 2018 and January 2020. The general approach was to complete Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) approved safety measures for 25th Ave, 4th Ave, 5th Ave, E. Bellevue Avenue, and Villa Terrace to establish a “Quiet Zone.”

**Federal Railroad Administration Requirements**

FRA regulations require trains to sound horns when approaching an at-grade crossing, occupied station platforms, construction zones, and when a trespasser is spotted by the conductor in the railroad right of way. This requirement to blow a horn in the above situations must be followed at all times of the day. Trains are required to sound their horns at designated distances up to a quarter mile in advance of each at-grade crossing depending on operating speed. In the City, there are at-grade crossings at Villa Terrace, E. Bellevue Avenue, 1st Avenue, 2nd Avenue, 3rd Avenue, 4th Avenue, 5th Avenue, and 9th Avenue.

In 2005, the FRA established Title 29, Part 222, titled “Use of Locomotive Horns at Public Highway-Rail Grade Crossings,” also known as the “Train Horn Rule.” The Train Horn Rule allows cities to establish a “Quiet Zone” to restrict the use of train horn noise along train corridors. In order to establish a “Quiet Zone,” a city must implement FRA approved safety measures at a number of at-grade crossings within the proposed segment. FRA approved safety measures include upgraded four-quadrant gates (as opposed to the standard two-quadrant gates currently used in the City), concrete medians, street closures, and one-way street conversions. A “Quiet Zone” may only take effect after all FRA approved safety measures are installed and operational.

In addition to implementation of FRA approved safety measures, cities must certify that the FRA approved safety measures sufficiently mitigate the increased risk of collision resulting from restricting train horns, based on a collision risk review assessment. Eligibility of an established “Quiet Zone” is reassessed annually through the FRA’s annual risk review process, as the proposed segment’s risk index may change based on changes to traffic volumes or in case of any collisions at the at-grade crossings. It’s important to note that even within an established “Quiet Zone,” trains are still required to sound horns when approaching occupied station platforms, construction zones, or whenever a trespasser is spotted by the conductor in the railroad right of way.

Lastly, a city must complete the following administrative steps before a “Quiet Zone” can be established:

- Conduct a meeting, called a Diagnostic Meeting, with FRA and all required stakeholders (e.g., CPUC, Caltrain, and Union Pacific) to evaluate all crossings within the proposed segment in order to verify crossings conform to federal requirements, state requirements, and railroad requirements.
- Issue a Notice of Intent to establish a “Quiet Zone” to FRA and all required stakeholders and provide a 60-day comment period.
- Respond to comments submitted by FRA and all required stakeholders and implement modifications to crossings within the proposed segment, as necessary.
- Issue a Notice of Quiet Zone Establishment, which shall include a list of modifications implemented within the proposed segment to address issues presented during the Diagnostic Meeting and during the 60-day comment period. This notice must be issued at least 21 days before the “Quiet Zone” can be established.

### **City’s Progress with Establishment of a City-Wide Train Quiet Zone**

In 2021, the City completed the 25th Avenue Grade Separation project, which resulted in the conversion of 25<sup>th</sup> Avenue from an at-grade crossing to a grade separated crossing no longer requiring use of the train horn. The 4th and 5th Avenue Railroad Grade Crossings projects, which include installation of four-quadrant gates at 4th Avenue and 5th Avenue will be completed in 2024. These projects are important steps to help achieve the City’s goal of establishing a City-wide “Quiet Zone;” however, additional work is needed to fully satisfy FRA requirements.

In 2022, staff initiated a study to evaluate FRA approved safety measures at Villa Terrace and/or E. Bellevue Ave. and associated potential impacts on traffic operations, peak-hour traffic volumes, walking, bicycling, and emergency services. In addition, these street modifications were evaluated with respect to engineering feasibility and FRA guidelines for establishing a “Quiet Zone.” The following alternatives were analyzed:

- Existing Conditions: both at-grade crossings remain open;
- Alternative 1: Villa Terrace crossing is permanently closed and concrete medians are installed on E. Bellevue Ave;
- Alternative 2: E. Bellevue Ave crossing is permanently closed; and
- Alternative 3: Both at-grade crossings are permanently closed.

Based on the study’s findings, staff recommends Alternative 1 for Council’s consideration.

### **Recommended Next Steps**

Staff is requesting Council feedback and direction on proceeding with establishment of a city-wide train “Quiet Zone” utilizing Alternative 1:

- Staff to conduct a robust public outreach and education program regarding the at-grade crossing closure at Villa Terrace and concrete medians on E. Bellevue Avenue;
- Staff to continue and finalize the design of FRA approved safety measures at Villa Terrace and E. Bellevue Avenue;
- Staff to begin the construction of FRA approved safety measures at Villa Terrace and E. Bellevue Avenue after the outreach and education program concludes; and
- Nearing the completion of all FRA approved safety measures, staff to work with FRA and required stakeholders (e.g CPUC, Caltrain, and Union Pacific) to complete administrative steps to establish a city-wide train “Quiet Zone”.

### **BUDGET IMPACT:**

There is no budget impact due to the presentation of this informational item. These planning efforts and budget for implementation of FRA approved safety measures at Villa Terrace and E. Bellevue Avenue are funded by the Train Quiet Zone project (#462205).

### **ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINATION:**

This action of receiving an informational update is not a project subject to CEQA, because it is an organizational or administrative activity that will not result in direct or indirect physical changes in the environment. (CEQA Guidelines Section 15378(b)(5).)

**NOTICE PROVIDED**

All meeting noticing requirements were met.

**ATTACHMENTS**

None

**STAFF CONTACT**

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