



Quiet Zones

White Paper No. 15

Hank Williams and Bob Dylan may have romanticized the “lonesome whistle” of a train in song, but for many of those living within shouting distance of a railroad track a train horn is anything but musical. Recognizing that, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) has created an exception to its rule that generally requires trains to sound their horns as a warning to motorists, pedestrians and others when trains approach road intersections, which are commonly called “grade crossings.” This exception is called a “quiet zone.”

A quiet zone is a stretch of track with road crossings where train horns are not required to sound. The minimum length for these zones is a half mile, and there is no maximum length. Quiet zones can be for 24-hour periods, or can be limited to shorter periods such as overnight or in the morning. Within the SMART rail corridor, freight trains could also be exempted from sounding their horns at quiet zone crossings.

Establishing Quiet Zones

A public authority can designate quiet zones if certain Supplemental Safety Measures (SSMs) are implemented. SMART is proposing such measures, including four-quadrant gates and/or roadway medians and channelization devices, to qualify for quiet zones. These create more awareness about the presence of the railway and prevent cars from driving around closed gates, the most common cause of incidents.

An alternative to the establishment of SSMs are Alternative Safety Measures (ASMs). These include non-engineering elements such as public awareness campaigns or photo enforcement technology. If the use of ASMs is the only safety measure being pursued, then the city or county making the request for the quiet zone must apply to the FRA.

SMART, however, is recommending that quiet zones be considered only with full SSM upgrades to ensure additional safety. SMART has budgeted for quiet zones in its Expenditure Plan, and has offered to fund quiet zone implementation for those communities that request it. In addition, SMART has worked with the California Legislature to provide additional funding designated for quiet zones. Again, with the implementation of SSMs, an application to the FRA is not required to establish a quiet zone.

Cost of Implementation

SMART has included the cost of signals and four quadrant gates in its Expenditure Plan for all crossings, at a cost of about \$250,000 per crossing. It also includes funds for curb channelization at 10 intersections, at \$150,000 each. These 10 intersections are in locations where local jurisdictions had expressed interest to SMART in establishing quiet zones. SMART can expand this list of crossings slated for SSM improvements based on input from local communities.

Liability

Some have expressed concerns that quiet zones will increase liability for local jurisdictions. The presence of a quiet zone could remove the “failure to sound horn” as a cause of action in a lawsuit involving a collision at a grade crossing. However, this does not mean that local governments would assume all liability for grade-crossing incidents. The courts ultimately determine liability and culpability for incidents based on the particular circumstances of each case.

SMART’s Commitment

In SMART’s 2006 Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR), SMART committed to work with local jurisdictions to pursue quiet zones at requested locations. Rail engineering and technical expertise will be provided for the review of quiet zone locations and additional funding, if necessary, will be provided.

For more information about the SMART rail and trail project, go to www.sonomamarintrain.org or call SMART’s information lines in Marin, 415-419-3510, or Sonoma, 707-583-2323.