

## Train noise to remain for a while in Del Mar

### Creating quiet zone could cost millions

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DEL MAR – It's been more than two years and \$18,000 since the City Council took the first step toward stifling the train horns at the railroad crossing next to the Powerhouse.

Now it will take an additional \$20,000 just to move the project along, and up to \$4 million to establish a so-called quiet zone, city officials have learned.

The council in August 2005 voted to hire a consultant to study the feasibility of establishing a quiet zone at Del Mar's one train crossing. In February, the consultant, JMD Planning of West Covina, said the proposed quiet zone is doable, but will require significant, and expensive, safety upgrades.

Despite recent allegations that the train noise is getting worse, a quiet zone isn't likely to be a high priority for cash-strapped Del Mar. The city has yet to find the money for two big-ticket capital projects already in the pipeline: a \$3.5 million lifeguard station at 17th Street and a \$5 million replacement for the aging 21st Street sewage pump station.



DAN TREVAN / Union-Tribune  
A Coaster train crossed the intersection of 15th Street and Coast Boulevard in Del Mar. Residents have complained of noise from engineers blowing the trains' horns.

Residents have complained for years about the noise generated by train engineers. But lately the train horns have been sounding off more frequently and longer than they are required to, according to Klaus Gubernator, who lives on the hillside above the crossing.

To prove his his point, Gubernator is documenting when the trains first sound off, how many times, and where they are when the first honk blares forth.

He's been sending the data to Councilman Henry Abarbanel and to David Scherer, Del Mar's director of public works. Scherer has passed the information along to the Federal Railroad Administration office in Sacramento, which has promised to contact the train operators and report back to city officials.

“They appear to be sounding the whistles as they enter the San Dieguito Lagoon rather than closer (to the crossing). The concern is primarily the southbound trains blowing before they need to,” Scherer said.

Close to 60 trains a day pass through Del Mar. They include the North County Transit District's Coaster, Amtrak passenger service, and Burlington Northern Santa Fe freight trains.

Federal regulations call for engineers to sound a warning starting a quarter-mile or 15 to 20 seconds before a crossing. According to Gubernator, some engineers are sounding off as they pass the Del Mar Fairgrounds, more than a mile to the north.

The consultants' report to the City Council acknowledged the obvious – “(the) local community including beach goers experience significant horn noise” as trains approach 15th Street.

Under Federal Railway Administration guidelines, communities can establish quiet zones to exempt themselves from the mandatory warning requirement, but they also have to install special “quad gates,” a double set of arms to block vehicles and pedestrians from crossing the tracks when a train approaches.

The crossings must also be upgraded with raised medians, fencing, signal lights, and road striping in order to qualify for quiet-zone status.

The JMD study presented the city with two alternatives. It can keep the current configuration of one lane of traffic in each direction, with safety upgrades priced at \$400,000 to \$2.1 million.

Or it can modify the Coast Boulevard crossing to one southbound lane only. In that case, the safety upgrades will cost \$800,000 to \$4 million.

The price is based on different configurations of gates, signals and other upgrades to keep vehicles and pedestrians off the tracks. In exchange, engineers would no longer have to sound off as they approached the crossing, except in an emergency.

Del Mar isn't the only North County city looking at quiet zones. Oceanside and Carlsbad are, and so is the city of San Diego. But the North County Transit District maintains the tracks, and it is also the lead agency in petitioning the federal government to establish the quiet zones.

“The NCTD is self-insured. We also have insurance coverage for accidents that occur along the railroad right-of-way,” said the transit district's Tom Kelleher.

But the NCTD, understandably, does not want to assume the liability if an accident occurs at a quiet-zone railroad crossing. Insurers are reluctant to provide that kind of coverage to individual municipalities, Kelleher said, but the agency is now able to include them under its own policy as long as the cities pay the premium differential, he said.

At current prices, Del Mar could purchase \$30 million in liability coverage for its one grade crossing for an \$800 annual premium, Kelleher said. The only caveat is that the safety upgrades “must be built to our standards, since we will do the maintenance.”

So, where does Del Mar go from here?

“One of the things the consultants and the NCTD would like us to do is a study of pedestrian flow

along the right of way, costing about \$20,000, and that's where it stands right now," Councilman Dave Druker said.

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