

Seeking a reprieve from loud horns, Menlo Park residents push for Caltrain quiet zone

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Menlo Park residents are fed up with blaring train horns waking babies and rattling their nerves. At a March 24 community meeting, they implored city officials to create a quiet zone along the Caltrain tracks to give them some relief.

It's a topic that's clearly struck a chord in many people. At the city's March 18 priority-setting meeting, 41% of the hundreds of written comments from residents asked the city to establish a quiet zone for train noise.

“(Train horns) continue to be a quality of life issue that’s been raised for two years now,” resident Daniel Garden wrote. “The horns wake up my infant children from afternoon naps and is a source of stress. There are clearly less intrusive ways to ensure trains can cross the street safely.”

Caltrain engineers have to sound the horn four times every time a train gets within a quarter-mile of its next crossing with a road. Due to the close proximity of Menlo Park's four rail crossings, the horn can blast up to 16 times over a distance of only about 1.1 miles as each train passes through the city. The sound of the horn is required to be between 96 to 110 decibels. For context, 110 decibels is as loud as a jackhammer.

One resident at the meeting said that he measured a level of 120 decibels in his yard, located 100 feet from the train tracks.

Establishing a quiet zone requires that the city introduce new safety measures at railway crossings. City staff at the meeting said that these improvements would require cooperation between Menlo Park, Palo Alto and East Palo Alto. Each crossing has to have gates, flashing lights and warning time devices; the zone must be at least a half-mile long; and it must not have a regular (non-quiet) crossing within a quarter of a mile of the first or last crossing of the zone. With these safety improvements, the engineers would not have to blow the horns at each crossing and could only blow the horn if they encounter a hazard.

A resident at the community meeting who complained about sleepless nights due to train noise said, “So what can we do to get to the next step?”

City staff said that there are several steps that the process needs, starting with approval from multiple committees and City Council approval before city staff can start the design process. This is followed by meetings with Caltrans, Caltrain and other agencies, but the design process could be fast-tracked.

Atherton created a [quiet zone in 2016](#) by installing quad gates with detection loops, which prevent vehicles from driving around lowered crossing gates. The project got widespread support from the community but pushback from train engineers. Train operators continued to sound horns at crossings until they were [threatened with fines](#) from the town.

Grade separation projects are currently being considered for all four Menlo Park train crossings, so vehicles and pedestrians would no longer traverse the tracks. The city plans to make the quiet zone safety improvements in conjunction with these projects. Menlo Park's current plan for grade separation is a hybrid approach in which the roads would be lowered and the train tracks would be raised.

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