

Tired of train horns, Menlo Park and Palo Alto advance plans for 'quiet zone'

Zone would cover four crossings in Menlo Park, one in north Palo Alto

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Uploaded: Thu, Apr 27, 2023, 10:49 am

Palo Alto and Menlo Park residents who live near the railroad tracks have a common headache: blaring train horns.

Sounding the horn is a loud ritual that train engineers are required to perform when they approach an intersection with local roads, starting at a quarter-mile before the crossing. And it's one that hundreds of residents in the two cities are hoping will soon come to an end.

Josh Orenberg, a Palo Alto resident at the apartment complex at 101 Alma St., spoke for many of his neighbors when he spearheaded a [petition](#) last year called, "Stop the incessant disturbance of the peace that is the train horn!" It received 238 signatures.

"For some it interrupts their sleep and for others it interferes with activities requiring focus," states the petition, noting that the disruption occurs "countless times a day and is completely unnecessary" because of the existing gate and median at the intersection of Alma and El Camino, near the Palo Alto Avenue rail crossing.

The outcry has been even louder in Menlo Park, where the City Council discussed on Tuesday, April 25, everyone's preferred solution: the creation of "quiet zones" that would snuff out the horn noise. The following night, the Planning and Transportation Commission in Palo Alto similarly took up the subject.

According to Peter Meyerhofer, a consultant with the firm Kimley-Horn and Associates, which is advising both cities, train horns are currently required by the Federal Railroad Administration to sound at volumes of 96 to 100 decibels, which is roughly equivalent to a power tool or a honking car. The aim is to be "loud enough to catch attention," he said.

To eliminate the requirement, communities can create quiet zones by installing infrastructure that makes rail crossings so safe that the horn is no longer necessary. Exactly what type of infrastructure depends on the intersection, with busier areas typically requiring greater fixes.

"By adding the infrastructure, we're doing an analysis that shows that a particular crossing or set of crossings are safer with these added improvements than they were previously, when the horn was sounding," Meyerhofer said.

Both cities are eager to create quiet zones, an amenity that Menlo Park residents have been requesting for several years. If plans move forward, their shared quiet zone would stretch for 1.5 miles. In Menlo Park, it would include four crossings: Encinal Avenue, Glenwood Avenue, Oak Grove Avenue and Ravenswood Avenue. In Palo Alto, it would cover the city's northernmost crossing, Palo Alto Avenue.

Menlo Park residents pushed the council on Tuesday to advance the quiet zone effort. Amy Mushlin, who lives near the Glenwood Avenue crossing, said that she and her fellow advocates represent just a "tip of the iceberg" when considering the number of residents who would benefit from the improvements. The city's plans to build housing near transit would make the quiet zones even more valuable.

"There are a lot of us here along the corridor," Mushlin said. "And more are coming on board soon."

But while both Palo Alto and Menlo Park are seeking the same outcome, their journeys toward quiet zones will be drastically different, according to the Kimley-Horn analysis. Menlo Park's infrastructure, according to the study, is poised to be costlier, more complex and take longer to implement than Palo Alto's.

Part of the reason is the sheer number of crossings: The former has four; the latter one. But just as critical is the level of improvements that would be required to bring these crossings to a "quiet zone" standard. Consultants from Kimley-Horn concluded that the only feasible improvement in Menlo Park that would facilitate a quiet zone is the installation of four quadrant gates at the crossings with sensors that detect the presence of vehicles to make sure they are not trapped on the tracks.

According to staff and consultants, having cross streets adjacent to the tracks — Alma Street, Merrill Street, Garwood Way — means that a cheaper alternative such as raised medians would not be sufficient.

"Closing or converting streets to one-way also does not appear feasible without further, extensive study and outreach," Hugh Louch, Menlo Park's assistant director of Public Works, wrote in a report. "Four quadrant gates have exit gates in addition to entrance gates, eliminating the ability for wrong-way driving."

For Menlo Park, the chief barrier is cost: Installing quadrant gates at all four crossings would cost more than \$8 million, according to Kimley-Horn.

The council is also considering moving ahead with quadrant gates at just two of the four crossings: Ravenswood and Oak Grove avenues, which have the highest risk scores, according to the FRA. Because the federal agency considers the average risk of all crossings in the proposed quiet zone and not the individual risk at each crossing, installing gates at these would reduce the score for the entire area, allowing the city to qualify for a quiet zone, according to the report.

While local proponents of quiet zones strongly backed this approach, the high cost of installing even two sets of quadrant gates gave council members pause. Council member Drew Combs said that when discussing potential quiet zones in the past with community advocates, he was assured that the project would cost the city a few hundred thousand dollars. The new price tag, he noted, far exceeds that estimate.

"This has never been sketched out as part of city's priorities and goals," Combs said during the April 25 discussion. "It came up as a result of resident advocacy, and I think it's valid."

"It's valid if you're talking about a \$600,000 project. But at some point, if you're talking about an \$8.2 million project, I think at some point we have to ask ourselves how does this fit into larger goals and is this equitable?"

His council colleagues generally agreed. While they lauded the aim of establishing a quiet zone and acknowledged the high community interest, both Mayor Jen Wolosin and council member Betsy Nash said they want to have this conversation in the context of the city budget. Council members hope to cover some of the costs through grant funding. Even if the city were to receive a grant, however, staff expect the implementation of a quiet zone to take several years.

Palo Alto, by contrast, faces a far more direct path to a quiet zone. Kimley-Horn has determined that the Palo Alto Avenue intersection would not need quadrant gates installed to qualify as a quiet zone. The city would merely need to raise and extend an existing median so as to create a barrier that keeps cars from swerving onto the tracks. Meyerhofer said the raised median has to be about 8 inches, high enough to discourage the driver of a standard vehicle from going over it.

"The good news is that this type of improvement is much, much cheaper than putting a four-quad gate system in and essentially does the same purpose," Meyerhofer said.

Ripon Bhatia, senior engineer at Palo Alto's Office of Transportation, said the cost of raising the median would be about \$150,000. He also suggested that staff plans to explore in the future the prospect of adding quiet zones around the three busier rail crossings south of Palo Alto Avenue: Churchill Avenue, Charleston Road and East Meadow Drive.

The Planning and Transportation Commission strongly supported moving ahead with the median modification and establishment of a quiet zone. Vice Chair Bryna Chang and Commissioner Allen Aiken both said that the project would benefit many people for a relatively low cost.

"This is clearly of interest to a lot of people, and it seems like the benefit far outweighs the costs," Aiken said. "Let's go for it."

Commissioner Cari Templeton agreed.

"Yes, this sounds awesome! I hope the council will do it," she said.

Both the Menlo Park council and the Palo Alto planning commission acknowledged during their respective discussions that even with the proposed improvements, the "quiet zone" wouldn't be totally quiet. Bells would still ring when the gates come down and train engineers would still have the option of blaring the horn in the interest of safety — they just won't be required to do so.

"What we're offering is not a quiet zone but a less loud zone," Combs said. "I think it's important that we understand that."