

# Train Horns—Frequently Asked Questions

**Who regulates trains, train horns and other train noise?** Trains in Washington State are regulated by the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission, [www.utc.wa.gov](http://www.utc.wa.gov). The City of Mount Vernon has no regulatory authority.

**What are Mount Vernon's options for reducing train noise?** One option for any community, including Mount Vernon, is to qualify for a quiet zone under rules established by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA).

A quiet zone is a stretch of track where the FRA has agreed that trains are not required to sound the horn at each public crossing except in emergencies. Quiet zones are at least a half-mile long. The Mount Vernon City Council would make the final decision about pursuing and establishing quiet zones. Another alternative is to close some unnecessary crossings, which automatically reduces the points where trains must blow their horns.

**How are quiet zones established?** Only the FRA can grant a quiet zone through the quiet zone application process. The quiet zone criteria can be found on the FRA website, <http://www.fra.dot.gov>. Local government must work in cooperation with the railroad and the state transportation authority to assess the risk of collision at each proposed grade crossing. A determination is made about the safety engineering improvements necessary to reduce the risk associated with silencing the horns based on local conditions such as road traffic volumes, train traffic volumes, the accident history and physical characteristics of the crossing, and existing safety measures. Communities can invest in additional grade-crossing safety devices to qualify for a quiet zone. Once all necessary safety engineering improvements are complete, the local community must certify to FRA that the required level of risk reduction has been achieved. A quiet zone becomes effective and train horns go silent only when all necessary additional safety measures are installed and operational.

**Can the City of Mount Vernon establish quiet zones?** The City has the opportunity to establish quiet zones under rules issued by the FRA in 2006. Local agencies have the opportunity to establish quiet zones if they are **willing to undertake, and pay for**, steps to address risk based on specific criteria at the crossings. These remedial steps can include median dividers, full-width crossing gates, grade separations, and crossing closures. The actions to be taken depend on the calculation of potential risk, or risk index, at each of the crossings within a proposed quiet zone. Pedestrian crossings require additional warning signs or upgrades.

**What is the estimated cost for establishing quiet zones in Mount Vernon?** The City of Bellingham hired a consultant to evaluate the feasibility of implementing quiet zones. The 2007 report identified that over \$1.2 million dollars would be needed to construct just 1 quiet zone. The City of Mount Vernon has not conducted a feasibility study, but believes that the cost would be similar to Bellingham's projected costs.

**Will I still hear train horns in designated quiet zones?** Yes. Freight and passenger trains will still sound horns in emergency situations, such as when a car or pedestrian is on the tracks. Trains are also required to sound horns when accelerating from a stopped position and when crews and equipment are working on the track.

**Why do trains sound horns?** Historically, railroads have sounded locomotive horns or whistles in advance of grade crossings as a safety precaution. The FRA requires that freight and passenger trains sound horns 20 seconds prior to reaching public crossings, 24 hours a day, to warn motorists and pedestrians that a train is approaching, unless a quiet zone has been approved. Train crews may also sound their horns when there is a vehicle, person, or animal on or near the track, and the crew determines it is appropriate to provide warning. Crews may also sound the horn when there are track or construction workers within 25 feet of a live track, or when gates and lights at the crossing are not functioning properly.

**What is the pattern for sounding the locomotive horn?** Under the Train Horn Rule, locomotive engineers must sound train horns for a minimum of 15 seconds, and a maximum of 20 seconds, prior to entering crossings. Wherever feasible, train horns must be sounded in a standardized pattern of 2 long, 1 short, and 1 long. The horn must continue to sound until the lead locomotive or train car occupies the grade crossing.

**How loud is a train horn?** The maximum volume for a train horn has been established at 110 decibels, and the minimum volume is 96 decibels.

**Whom do I contact at BNSF for additional information or complaints?**

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