

Subject: Petition for Quiet Zone Implementation in Great Falls, MT

Dear Members of the Great Falls City Council,

I am writing to petition the City of Great Falls and/or Cascade County to establish a Quiet Zone in accordance with Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) guidelines, addressing the growing concern over excessive train horn noise within our community, particularly during nighttime hours.

What is a 'Quiet Zone'

Quiet Zones are approved by public authorities, such as local municipalities, counties, or other governmental agencies responsible for traffic control and safety at public highway-rail grade crossings. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) oversees the regulatory process, but the actual approval of a Quiet Zone is carried out by the local public authority. This authority must first mitigate the safety risks posed by the absence of train horns by implementing Supplementary Safety Measures (SSMs) or Alternative Safety Measures (ASMs) at the crossings. In Haven Fort, Utah, they used simple signs posted stating train horns are not used during quiet hours. After these measures are installed, the local public authority submits a Notice of Quiet Zone Establishment to the FRA and railroad operators, indicating that the zone is ready for operation.

The FRA reviews the safety measures in place but does not directly grant approval or disapproval for individual Quiet Zones. Instead, the establishment of the Quiet Zone proceeds after the public authority complies with all requirements set by federal regulations, including safety improvements and proper notifications

Background:

As a resident of Great Falls and an Active-Duty member of the United States Air Force, I have firsthand experience with the impact of loud, frequent train horn blasts during late-night hours. These horns, often sounded between 9:00 PM and 2:00 AM, have become increasingly disruptive to the community. The disturbance from prolonged horn use, especially for residents living near the railway lines, has affected our sleep quality and overall well-being.

Growth of Great Falls:

Great Falls is experiencing significant growth and development, with expanding industries, a rising population, and increased commerce. As the city moves toward becoming a 24-hour hub of activity, maintaining a balance between economic growth and residents' quality of life is critical. Implementing a Quiet Zone would greatly benefit everyone in the community, including those working irregular hours, such as shift workers, first responders, and active-duty military personnel. Reducing noise pollution, particularly during nighttime hours, will allow the city to support its expanding economy while ensuring that all residents, including families with children and elderly citizens, can enjoy a quieter, healthier living environment. This proactive step aligns with Great Falls' vision of growth and inclusivity, supporting both economic progress and community well-being.

Health Risks:

Numerous studies have demonstrated that prolonged exposure to transportation noise, including train horns, can cause significant health risks. Research from Sweden, for example, highlights how noise-induced sleep disturbances contribute to increased stress levels, cardiovascular diseases, and cognitive impairments (Eriksson et al., 2017). The prolonged use of loud train horns during

nighttime hours also has a particularly negative impact on children, affecting their sleep and, consequently, their cognitive development and learning abilities (National Sleep Foundation, 2015). The World Health Organization and other public health entities have identified noise pollution as a serious public health issue, particularly in urban environments.

Quiet Zone Adoption in the U.S.:

As of 2019, more than 800 Quiet Zones have been established across the United States, according to the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA)(GAO)(Railroads). These zones have been implemented in both large cities and smaller towns, aiming to reduce the noise from routine train horn use while maintaining the necessary safety measures at railway crossings. With each new Quiet Zone, communities benefit from improved quality of life through reduced noise pollution, particularly during nighttime hours, while continuing to ensure public safety through FRA-approved Supplementary Safety Measures (SSMs).

Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Guidelines:

The FRA provides a path forward for communities like ours to address this issue by establishing Quiet Zones. A Quiet Zone is a designated section of a rail line where trains are not required to routinely sound their horns. Instead, Supplementary Safety Measures (SSMs), such as four-quadrant gates, medians, or other approved safety features, are installed to ensure public safety without the need for excessive horn use. To establish a Quiet Zone, the following criteria must be met:

1. The Quiet Zone must be at least 0.5 miles in length.
2. SSMs must be installed at all public crossings to mitigate the risk posed by the absence of the train horn.
3. The public authority must notify relevant stakeholders, including railroad operators and the FRA, and receive approval before implementing the Quiet Zone (Federal Railroad Administration, 2023).

Community Impact: Implementing a Quiet Zone would provide several benefits to the residents of Great Falls:

1. Improved Quality of Life: Reducing nighttime noise pollution will improve sleep quality and overall health for residents, especially those living near railway lines.
2. Economic Benefits: A quieter environment can increase property values and attract more residents and businesses to the area.
3. Public Safety: With the implementation of SSMs, public safety at railway crossings will be maintained without the need for loud train horns, ensuring that both residents and railroad operators are protected.

Case Studies: Communities such as San Jose, California, have successfully implemented Quiet Zones, significantly reduced noise pollution while maintaining safety at railway crossings (San José Spotlight, 2021). These case studies demonstrate that the balance between public safety and community well-being is achievable with proper planning and execution.

I(We) respectfully request that the City of Great Falls take the necessary steps to implement a Quiet Zone within our community. This action would greatly improve the quality of life for residents while maintaining the safety of motorists and pedestrians. I urge the City Council to collaborate with the

FRA and railroad operators to assess the feasibility of this proposal and explore funding options for the installation of SSMs at key railway crossings.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to your response and am eager to support any efforts to make this initiative a reality.

Sincerely,

Damian Conn
Neighborhood Council 2

Shyla Patera
Neighborhood Council 2, Chair

Tim Croft
Neighborhood Council 2, Chair

Frank Speidel
Neighborhood Council 2, Secretary

References:

- Eriksson, C., Bodin, T., Selander, J., Burström, B., Pershagen, G., & Nilsson, M. E. (2017). Long-term exposure to transportation noise in relation to the development of cardiovascular disease—A cohort study. *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health*, 43(6), 519-525. <https://doi.org/10.5271/sjweh.3660>
- Federal Railroad Administration. (2023). Train Horn Rule and Quiet Zones. U.S. Department of Transportation. Retrieved from <https://railroads.dot.gov/elibrary/train-horn-rule-and-quiet-zones>
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