

February 28, 2008

Riverline lightrail & railroad noise

Since the start of NJ Transit Riverline service in March 2004, the impact of train horns has degraded the quality of life in Delanco. Officials and residents from the communities along the railroad have worked to reduce or eliminate the noise intrusion. This is a slow process working with many layers of government bureaucracy. There have been several meetings with state and federal railroad officials in the last year as we seek a long-term solution to this. The final goal is to reclaim the quiet quality of life our town once had while maintaining the high standard of safety.

A provision of recently adopted Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) rules allows for "quiet zones" at railroad crossings (DOT / FRA 49, CFR Parts 222 & 229). In quiet zones, trains would not sound horns, but would require significant improvements in other railroad safety devices such as gates, barriers, or altering traffic patterns to maintain the same level of safety. Quiet zones require modification of grade level street crossings to block all vehicular traffic when a train is passing. Modifying crossings prevents vehicles from driving around the single gate that currently only block one lane of the roadway. Depending on the layout of the street and adjacent streets, four way gates and median barriers are installed to completely block a roadway when a train passes. Other options to meet quiet zone requirements are closing streets completely or making roadways one way. Obviously in Delanco, closing Coopertown Road and Perkins Lane or making them one way is not an option.

Presently, the cost of the equipment and modification of streets for quiet zones is paid by the local municipality. Four way gate systems cost \$300,000 to \$500,000 per crossing. Maintenance costs are borne by the municipality and estimated at \$4,000 to \$10,000 annually. Liability for any accident in a quiet zone falls solely on the local municipality that established the quiet zone. Your Congress in Washington, DC approved this new regulation and provided full

liability exemption to railroads and railroad operators operating in quiet zones.

In the last few months both Senator Diane Allen (7th District) and Assemblymen Herb Conaway, MD and Jack Conners (7th District) have sponsored legislation requesting the federal government establish a funding program to assist communities to defray the cost of establishing quiet zones. The resolutions (Allen's NJ Senate Resolution # 13 and Conners / Conaway's NJ Assembly Resolution # 97) are now being considered in Trenton. There is no change to the liability burden the federal law imposes on communities in either Resolution.

Given the significant costs of gates and barriers to establish quiet zones, and the liability burden the municipalities would incur, alternate solutions should be explored. A solution that works in one community may not work in another town depending on the street layout and proximity to other crossings.

Even a slight modification to Riverline operations may be helpful. In Delanco, over two hundred homes in an historic residential area border the tracks at the Coopertown Road crossing, some with their front doors and bedrooms only 100 feet from 86db train horns. These residents are negatively impacted by piercing train horns *ninety times a day*. A proposed development (HOVBROS *Savannah Mews*) of 165 homes immediately east of the Delanco station will bring in several hundred new residents, all within earshot of train horns.

The Delanco station is less than 500 feet from the Coopertown Road crossing. At the crossing, the train is slowing for the stop or just beginning to accelerate. If the Riverline train crossed Coopertown Road at 15 mph it would not be required to sound the horn. This would seem to have a minimal effect on the schedule, but result in a significant improvement to the quality of life for hundreds of Delanco residents.

NJ Transit has recently submitted a waiver request to the FRA to operate the Riverline through Palmyra and Riverton under the "streetcar" type rules (Street operating rules, TTSI 19-2, Rule 977). The Riverline has nine street crossings in 1.4 miles (7400 feet) of

track through Palmyra and Riverton. These are the same rules the Riverline has followed since the beginning of light rail service when passing through Camden and Burlington City where no horns are used, only bells.

The idea of establishing a "quiet hours" schedule without horns throughout the entire route has been suggested (*Burlington County Times, August 20, 2007*). This would greatly improve the quality of life for residents along the Riverline. Trains would operate without horns through residential area grade crossings at 15mph, for example, from 6:00am to 7:30am, and again from 7 pm through midnight. Grade crossings would continue to be protected by existing gates, lights, and bells. This is a level of crossing protection that Camden and Burlington City grade crossings, where the horns are silent, but mishaps have occurred, do not have. Current practice could resume from 7:30am to 7pm.

I have also been working to resolve noise complaints due to late night and early morning freight train operations. Residents on Perkins Lane, West Avenue, and Pennsylvania Avenue adjacent to the railroad are also next to three railroad spur lines in Delanco. The spur tracks go to freight sidings to several businesses in town. CONRAIL is the owner and primary operator of the tracks through Delanco (by agreement, NJ Transit uses the CONRAIL track for the Riverline from 6am thru 11pm).

Late night noise from the freight train operations comes from shuttling freight cars in and out of sidings, recoupling freight cars, and the locomotive engines.

The nighttime freight noise problem will be difficult to solve. I've talked to and met officials from the FRA, CONRAIL, and local businesses to learn the facts and find a solution. The freight railroad has operated here in Delanco for many years, since the Civil War. The railroad sidings in town have limited capacity, so freight cars must be exchanged frequently, several times a week, to maintain supply to those businesses. And CONRAIL actually monitors the activity and movement of their locomotives (through GPS) to operate them as efficiently as possible and save fuel. That means they try to get the job done quickly and move on to the next delivery.

Our community, like all towns in New Jersey is approaching “build out”, the point where no new development can occur. We’re all living closer to industry and busy transportation arteries, like railroads. The old ways of doing things have to change to allow people to live in their homes without the jarring experience of an 86db train horn at breakfast or freight trains shaking their home at 4am.

You can help. Your calls and letters help us make the case to return to the quiet we all deserve. Every voice, every letter helps. I’ve asked Delanco Code enforcement officer to log train & horn noise complaints here in Delanco. I also encourage residents to call, e-mail, or send letters to your elected officials and officials at NJ Transit. And give the Township a copy of your letter or e-mail so we can remind your elected representatives and railroad officials at the next meeting of *your* concerns.

Sincerely,

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Delanco Township Committee

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