

# Public Meeting – MNCW New Canaan Branch Noise Abatement Feasibility Study

Date/Time: 10/1/2024, 6:30 p.m.

Location: Harry Bennett Branch, Ferguson Library- Stamford, CT

Attendees: (about 25 people excluding SRF and WestCOG staff)

## Presentation:

- Todd Fontanella of WestCOG gave an introduction detailing previous discussions and recommended actions based upon a January 2020 public meeting about train horn noise at this same venue. The introduction also highlighted WestCOG’s responsibilities for transportation planning in the region and its role in engaging SRF Consulting Group (SRF) to analyze this issue on the behalf of the communities of Darien, New Canaan and Stamford, and to propose recommended actions. This Study represents a first step – analyzing technical feasibility and estimating construction costs for improvements at specific locations – using best available information.
- Darien First Selectman Jon Zagrodzky provided a few remarks regarding existing challenges with the train horn noises, Constant Warning Time and a waiver, and discussion of the estimated costs that were presented by SRF. How can this be funded?
  - Bonding
  - If this process advances, there still needs to be funding found for design/engineering work; construction, and, if implemented, there will be yearly maintenance tasks that the municipalities will be financially responsible for.
  - Grants and/or other public programs – SRF identified some potential sources in their report.
  - Special taxing district – if this concept was implemented, those residents and other property owners who directly benefit from this would be assessed to pay for the improvements (note that in Darien, there’s a property tax discount for residents who live near the rail line).

Note that this study covers the entirety of the New Canaan Branch and its eleven crossings, across three communities. Going forward, if one or two of the communities elect not to participate, the risk analysis would have to be recalculated and recommendations for improvements would have to be reexamined, along with construction cost estimates.

## Comments and Questions:

1. What is Constant Warning Time? Is it functioning on the corridor currently?
  - a. Constant Warning Time (CWT) is a technology that detects both the motion of a train and the approximate speed of a train to predict the arrival of the train at the crossing and to provide a relatively uniform warning time in accordance with a pre-set value.<sup>1</sup> It is not currently installed on the New Canaan Branch and would be required in order to

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<sup>1</sup> Ohio Department of Transportation

establish a Quiet Zone unless the communities succeed in obtaining a waiver from the Federal Railroad Administration.

2. The presentation slide listing recommended crossing improvements only shows improvements at five of the crossings. What is being done at the other crossings? The improvements were targeted to specific crossings to reduce the level of risk consistent with federal guidance for establishing Quiet Zones.
3. How long will it take to get the waiver?
  - a. While it is not known what time would be required specifically to obtain a CWT waiver, a typical Quiet Zone process is estimated to take about two years.
4. This line has a slower speed than other lines in the country. Is this considered in the review of the QZ request?
  - a. Only in that it has bearing upon the Risk Index With Horns (RIWH) calculation.
5. If you get the CWT waiver, do you still need to bring the risk down?
  - a. Yes, other improvements at grade crossings within the proposed Quiet Zone would remain necessary to reduce risk.
6. Do the recommendations include raised medians?
  - a. There are constraints in the field, i.e. roadway/crossing geometrics, or adjacent utility and/or other structures, which do not allow enough space for raised medians. Therefore, the recommendations do not include raised medians.
7. Can cars drive over raised medians?
  - a. Non-traversable medians would be six (6) inches or higher so motorists won't be able to drive over them.
8. In terms of emergency vehicles, how are they able to traverse the medians?
  - a. Note in #6 above that we are not recommending the medians in our study.
9. Is there any thought about replacing some of the trains with buses instead, particularly during certain hours of the day like off-peak service?
  - a. CTDOT and MNCW would be the entities who set the schedule and make changes to service based upon ridership demands, operating costs, or other factors.
10. Have there been a minimum amount of improvements established that would meet the threshold and be less costly?
  - a. The recommended improvements are the minimum number of improvements that would enable the communities to apply for a Quiet Zone.
11. In terms of the actual noise reduction – the no horns sign – what about the crossing bells?
  - a. Crossing bells will still ring at each crossing so equipped (excepting Cemetary Road, which is not equipped with bells).
12. The City of Stamford's representative noted that under a Quiet Zone designation, the train engineers would still be able to sound the horn if they need to – i.e. trespassers, a vehicle blocking a grade crossing, maintenance crews in right-of-way, etc.
13. Now that three communities are involved – will there be an action plan in motion? In Darien, First Selectman Zagrodzky will have that discussion by the end of the year (for budgeting discussion). He committed to being the point of contact in Darien to coordinate with Stamford and New Canaan.
14. With respect to the crossing risk calculations, it appears that the difference between the national Quiet Zone Risk Index (QZRI) and the Risk Index With Horns (RIWH) for the Branch Line is

approximately 15,000. If the improvements are made, the QZRI for the Branch Line would fall to a level that is below the RIWH, sufficient to apply for a Quiet Zone. If we're just under that, what are the dangers of that QZRI risk increasing?

- a. The calculated QZRI number is sufficient to apply for a Quiet Zone.
  - b. If an incident happens at any of the crossings – that will impact the QZRI score (and could lead to a reevaluation of the quiet zone or require additional Branch Line crossing improvements).
15. In response to a resident's concern about noise, SRF noted that a key balancing issue for this Study is to maintain or improve the quality of life – but we all must acknowledge that safety is always the first priority.
16. An attendee referenced a New York Times article on airport noise from June 2023 which addressed impacts to Quality of Life and significant health issues which emanated from long-term noise exposure. This article emphasized the effects of noise interruptions.
17. Does the engineer have discretion in the timing of beginning to sound the horn, the length of time, and loudness?
- a. Loudness is controlled: horns cannot exceed 110 dB (between 90 and 110 for Class I)
  - b. Every train engineer is allowed to sound the horn.
  - c. The distance is 15 to 20 seconds of the train occupying the crossing or ¼ mile.
18. Does the train have automatic train braking? Each trainset is equipped with emergency braking systems, but not automatic braking systems. The engineer is in control of train braking.
19. Overall, the sound of the train horn exceeds highway noise.
- a. So many projects for highway noise, can something be done for train noise?
20. Has anyone considered a public private partnership to deliver the recommended improvements?
- a. This is something that the communities could try, but it would need a champion to begin those conversations and identify who would be involved.
  - b. The Consultant discussed one Quiet Zone P3 example in Iowa involving residents and a religious organization.
21. Is there any money coming from MNCW to defray some of the cost?
- a. No. (MNCW is the operator, CTDOT owns the infrastructure). In most if not all cases, the host municipality or municipalities are responsible for the costs of implementing (and maintaining) a Quiet Zone.
22. Jenna Gatto (Richmond Hill Road, New Canaan) –provided a copy of comments to WestCOG.
23. In the meantime – since this will take several years – is there any kind of retraining the engineers can take (during the day they barely hear the noise – at night they lay on the horn for several seconds at a time) worse at night than it is during the day.
- a. The discretion is left up to the engineer.
  - b. Should the study include a policy recommendation to educate the train workers?
24. Can the horn be automated? Trains are not equipped with automated horns. However, wayside horns at grade crossings are automated, where they are implemented.
25. First Selectman Dionna Carlson (New Canaan) urged federal legislators to make a change at the federal level.
26. Representative Tracy Marra and Representative Lucy Dathan suggested sending a joint letter to MNCW.
27. An attendee suggested reaching out to Congressman Jim Himes' office (group letter).