

Hush Hush, Maybe

Written by Erik Bojnansky, BT Senior Writer
July 2019

An expanded quiet zone for trains, but not an outright ban on horns



An expanded quiet zone from the Port of Miami to West Palm Beach that would slash the frequency of train horns is expected to go into effect this month.

Jennie Lopez, information officer for the Miami-Dade County Department of Transportation and Public Works, anticipates that the new quiet zone will be in place the second week of July. An exact date was expected to be announced July 2.

That's welcome news for homeowners living in Miami Shores, El Portal, Biscayne Park, North Miami, North Miami Beach, Aventura, and unincorporated northeast Miami-Dade, where there are currently no quiet zones for the FEC tracks that travel parallel to Biscayne Boulevard.

Under Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) regulations, trains traveling outside quiet zones are required to sound their horn four times when approaching an intersection -- at a volume between 96 and 110 decibels, which is roughly the loudness of a car horn at three feet.

Darin Held, an interior designer who lives near the tracks in El Portal, says he's thrilled to hear that there'll be a quiet zone for his community. As it stands now, Held says, he was considering moving in order to escape the frequent train horns that blare at all hours, including late at night. "It's been rough," Held says. "I'm a light sleeper."

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Murray Saltz, a purchasing agent who lives in River Park Estates in northeast Miami-Dade, calls the quiet zone a “step in the right direction.” He adds that “you hear train whistles at four in the morning.”



Aventura Mayor Enid Weisman says she’s received plenty of complaints from residents as well. “You hear it, like, 32 times a day, whenever they run,” she says. Although the mayor doesn’t live near the tracks, she says she often hears the train horns: “The sound travels.”

The FEC tracks are getting a lot of use. Virgin Trains USA, the rebranded Brightline passenger service owned by Fortress Investment Group and Richard Branson, runs up to 34 trains per day between the downtown areas of Miami, Fort Lauderdale, and West Palm Beach. The Florida East Coast Railway, now owned by Grupo Mexico, declined to comment to the *BT*. However, three years ago an FEC spokesman told the

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that the company runs 16 freight trains a day.

As pleased as Mayor Weisman is to hear that a quiet zone will soon be enacted, she says she doesn’t want it to come at the expense of safety. “I hope they’ve done enough education to the

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public so we don't have any more fatalities," she says.

Since 2017, when Fortress Investment Group started its Brightline test runs, 15 people have been killed by speeding passenger trains on the FEC tracks, according to news reports. In January 2019, a man standing on the tracks near NE 208th Street and West Dixie Highway, just west of Aventura, was killed by a Virgin Train, Channel 10 reported. Unlike freight trains, which travel slowly in Miami-Dade County, Virgin Trains reach speeds up to 80 miles per hour.

Not everyone is killed when hit by a speeding train. Just last month, a Virgin train smashed into a Nissan Pathfinder that was stuck on the tracks at NE 141st Street near Biscayne Boulevard. The SUV was mangled, yet the driver, while dazed, was okay, according to a witness. (The driver was taken to Aventura Hospital anyway.) Also in June, a man strolling along the train tracks in Hallandale Beach actually walked into a speeding Virgin train. "The conductor stated that the man was staggering and kept coming as he was blowing the horn," Lori Williams, Hallandale Beach's fire rescue division chief, told the *Miami Herald*. "He didn't get hit head-on. He walked into the side and bounced off."



Virgin Trains doesn't have a monopoly on accidents. A stunning 63 people have been killed by

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Tri-Rail trains since 2013, according to statistics released by the South Florida Regional Transportation Authority last month. Out of those 63 fatalities, only seven were at grade crossings.

In order to have a quiet zone, the FRA requires that a series of safety measures be put in place at public crossings, including four-quadrant gates with arms that completely cover roadways. Such measures were put in place along the FEC tracks within the City of Miami in 2012, enabling the creation of a quiet zone between the Port of Miami and NE 86th Street, says John Heffernan, deputy director of the City of Miami's office of communications. About five years later, in 2017, a quiet zone was approved by the FRA between Boca Raton and West Palm Beach. And this past May, the Broward Metropolitan Planning Organization announced that the FEC tracks in that county were now in a quiet zone.

In an e-mail to the *BT*, Lopez says the Florida Department of Transportation allocated \$1.1 million to put the needed safety measures in place at 18 crossings between NE 79th Street and County Line Road. "The improvements and additional safety measures have all been inspected and approved by the FRA as well as multiple other agencies," Lopez states. As of deadline, the county is entering the "notice of establishment" phase, a 21-day "hold" period that comes after an official notice to FRA to establish a quiet zone. During that period, "No Train Horn" signs are installed but covered. Those covers are removed at the end of the hold period, when the quiet zone is in place.

But just because there's a quiet zone doesn't mean that trains won't blow their horns. It merely eliminates the requirement that conductors *must* blow horns at intersections. An engineer still has the freedom to blow a train's horn if he or she thinks there's an emergency or spots a vehicle or person on the tracks.

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