

Safety and Noise Improvements Coming Down the Tracks

During the upcoming year, Madison plans to install new gates and lights at a number of railroad crossings. The new equipment will make these crossings significantly safer for those navigating through the Isthmus and eastside, and significantly quieter for those working and living nearby.

With the increase in freight train traffic over recent years, city residents have needed to make a lot of adjustments. Those rumbling rail cars filled with lumber, rocks and chemicals have made us deal with traffic delays, ear drum shattering noise, and most importantly, potential collisions. Luckily, Madison has seen only a few collisions and only one death. While the railroad companies and state railroad commissioner have been content to just blow their horns, residents had hoped for something better and safer.

During the upcoming year, crossing safety will improve dramatically when new equipment is installed at some Isthmus and eastside crossings. Work on the Madison's first "quiet zones" is underway. According to Steve Sonntag at the Department of Engineering: "In order to create a quiet zone the Federal Railroad Administration requires that all at-grade railroad crossings must have flashing lights and gates, power out indicators and constant warning time. A quiet zone must also be at least one half mile in length." These lights and gates typically cost \$200,000.

There have been some construction delays since the contractor has been overwhelmed with the request to supply crossing equipment all over the United States ever since the Federal Railroad Administration passed its rules regarding train horns. These rules eliminated existing whistle ban ordinances, including Madison's rule. In Wisconsin, 63 quiet zones have been established so far.

In Madison, three quiet zones have been proposed for downtown. The first includes rail crossings at North Shore Drive and Broom Street, the second includes West Washington Avenue, West Main Street, Doty Street, Bedford Street at West Wilson Street, the Bassett Street Pedestrian path, and the tracks at Broom Street, and the third includes the North Shore Drive Crossing at the Southwest Path and Lakeside Ave. These three zones are scheduled to be completed this fall.

Zone 3A is proposed for the eastside. It includes safety improvements at East Johnson Street, East Washington Avenue, the northernly most First Street crossing, Second Street, Fourth Street, and Winnebago Street. The vehicle crossing at Division Street will be removed and replaced with a bike path. As to when this zone will be completed, Sonntag said: "The plan is to begin the improvements this year, with final completion in the summer of 2008, when the intersection improvements are complete at Winnebago Street/Division Street."

After each zone is completed, the city must request that the state and FRA to approve the new safety improvements and Quiet Zone. The railroad companies are required to also recognize the new safety improvements and stop blowing their train horns no sooner than 21 days after receiving the notice that the Quiet Zone has been established.

City engineering staff have created a web site which shows the location of the railroad tracks and crossings throughout the city. Crossings have been grouped to prioritize areas for installation of better safety measures and creation of quiet zones. Cost estimates for each zone are provided and a current installation schedule are provided. You can view the map at city's web site:

<http://www.cityofmadison.com/engineering/quietZone.cfm>

Quiet zones do not come cheap. With improvements at all crossings, the city estimates the total cost to be over \$11 million. The Common Council has been reluctant to pay for the improvements unless reimbursed through tax incremental financing or TIF from new developments. For example, the crossing at the Winnebago Street was paid with TIF from the Union Corners Project. If the county builds a commuter rail system, crossing improvements are also likely. Creating a Quiet Zone 3, which extends from Division Street to Dempsey Road, is estimated to cost \$1.4 million. Redevelopment of the Royster Clark fertilizer plant on Cottage Grove Road may help pay for these improvements. However, Sonntag suggests the best way to get new quiet zones so your neighborhood can be safer and quieter is to contact your alder.

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