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What Can We Do About Train Horns on the New Canaan Branch? — Cameron on Transportation

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Trains make noise, especially when they blow their horns entering stations and at grade crossings. But for folks who live near the railroad branch lines, which have dozens of such crossings, the noise is too much.

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Those neighbors crammed a Stamford meeting this week seeking solutions. What they got was an education — and maybe some hope.

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The New Canaan Branch [has seven grade crossings](#) in a two-mile stretch, each requiring (under Federal Railroad Administration safety regulations) 10 seconds of horn blasts at 110 decibels.

That's louder than a jet taking off and almost as loud as a clap of thunder. The horn must be hit 20 seconds before going through the crossing, so the faster the train the sooner it must start and the farther away from the crossing.

Do some engineers blow longer than required? That's now easily tracked using on-train black boxes and TV cameras watching the crew and the track ahead. If engineers hit the horn for too short a time they risk losing their license.

Even on the main line of [Metro-North](#) where there are no grade crossings, the horns must be used entering each station to warn distracted riders to stand back. But between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. those blasts are optional.

Full disclosure: I live about a half mile from the mainline and I can hear the trains, day and night. I'm also about two miles from [the New Canaan branch](#), and I can hear those trains' horns as well. But I hear planes and traffic on I-95 too. It's part of living in suburbia.

For more immediate neighbors on the branch this noise is a real problem. It wakes up their kids and stresses their lives. They want a solution.

Some said the horns on the M8s are louder than before. They're not. They've been tested. And the older the horn, the less the volume. Some asked why we even need nighttime trains — at the same time as others complained about a lack of train service.

Remember folks: The railroad came first and residential investment followed. You chose to live there and you can't have it both ways — enjoying close proximity to the trains and then complaining about the noise. Or can you?

One solution may be “Wayside Horns,” putting the horns at the crossings instead of on the trains. They still have to blow as long and as loud, but where that's been tried complaints actually went up from nearby neighbors.

The better solution may be creating an FRA-designated Quiet Zone. That would require the towns to petition the feds and probably install “quad gates” stopping all traffic in both directions at a crossing at a cost of \$2 million per set ... and paid for by the towns, not CDOT or Metro-North.

In Quiet Zones there would be no train horns. But would it compromise safety?

The one thing not really discussed at the noise-stressed neighbors meeting was why horns are needed at all: because idiots ignore the gates and cause accidents getting themselves and/or passengers injured or killed.

One cynic in the crowd called that “natural selection”, taking such ignorant and self-centered motorists out of

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the gene pool. Another lady said she missed the good old days of crossing accidents and being able to ogle the wreckage.

That's just cold and misses the point: There are no easy solutions, and even the difficult ones are really expensive.

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