

Kensington man quiets Silver Spring trains

Decade-long battle ends in silence for Forest Glen

by Alex Ruoff | Staff Writer

For the first time since he moved to Kensington 10 years ago, Joe Rosenberg is thinking about going to bed without turning on the white noise machine he uses to block the noise of passing trains.

Despite the cold weather, he might leave the windows open, too.

"It's hard to say what I'll do now," he said. "I might run for mayor."

Starting Monday, the 61 trains that pass the crossover on Forest Glen Road in Silver Spring daily will no longer be required by federal law to sound their horns as a warning to approaching vehicles; establishing the state's first new Quiet Zone.

The announcement ends a decade-long fight by Rosenberg and his neighbors to quiet the horns, which he calls "deafening."

Residents from the Forest Glen Homeowners Association, the Rock Creek Hills Citizens Association, Glen Manor Condominiums, and almost 300 homeowners sent requests to county and state legislatures, requesting a quiet zone.

The 1994 Swift Rail Development Act created a mandate to support the existing practice of sounding a train whistle a half mile before reaching at-grade crossings — where vehicles cross the train tracks at the same level as the locomotive. That same law provides for quiet zones, but requires state and local departments of transportation to prove that they can make the crossing just as safe without the whistle, said Warren Flatau, a spokesman for the Federal Railroad Administration; the agency that approves the zones.

There are essentially two methods to qualify, he said. The "investment approach" includes installing additional safety measures at the crossings such as traffic channeling devices or gates that close as trains approach, or a risk-based system, where a municipality can prove that there is a low-likelihood of an accident if the whistle doesn't blow.

Montgomery County Councilwoman f Silver Spring said she took up the cause in 2008. In September of that year, the Montgomery County Department of Transportation presented a study of the crossing that revealed about 11,000 vehicles and 61 trains on average pass the crossing daily. Three accidents have been recorded there, the latest in 2000 when a backhoe was struck while working on the tracks.

In 2009, the department of transportation installed a median barrier and additional lights and signage near the crossing to improve safety, said Emil Wolanin, chief of the county transportation department's division of traffic engineering and operations.

The study estimated the cost of these measures at \$300,000.

"The reason I think that this was made possible was the extraordinary efforts that went into making this intersection that much safer," Ervin said.

In nearby Garrett Park, Town Councilman Jack Mandel said they are working to the same end.

"We're in the very early stages though," he said. "It's not easy to wind your way through the endless bureaucracy to find out who has the authority to do something like this.

Flatau said smaller municipalities, such as Garrett Park, will likely be more challenged in creating a quiet zone due to the high cost of installing safety measures.

"This can be an arduous process, because we want to ensure that safety is taken into account," he said.

Conductors can still sound whistles if they feel they need to make their presence known, Flatau said, but the FRA can issue warnings for companies who consistently disrupt the quiet zone.

Currently, two crossing in Cumberland and one in Hagerstown have pre-rule quiet zones, which were established before the legislation was approved.

Wolanin said the county does not have other quiet zone applications pending. Only a government body can make such a request.