

Statement of Rep. Zoe Lofgren  
Hearing on: "Member Day"  
House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure  
Wednesday, April 14, 2021 (11:00am)

Thank you Chairman DeFazio and Ranking Member Graves for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing.

My statement today focuses on reconciling the needs of growing residential communities and cities with increased rail activity. Congress has long recognized the benefits of rail as a means of mass transit and efficient shipping. However, as cities become more densely populated and rail traffic increases, I urge the Committee to examine the need for reforms in this area to ensure that railroad companies do not pose an extreme nuisance, or worse yet danger, to the communities they pass through.

The historic San José neighborhoods of Japantown and Hensley in my district are located along the Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR) Warm Springs Corridor. In 2018, UPRR informed the community of plans to increase service throughout the day and to add train service at night.

Since February 1, 2019, UPRR has been running trains in the area at the nighttime hours including but not limited to 5:30 pm, 7:00 pm, 10:00 pm, 11:30 pm, 12:30 am, 2:00 am, and 4:00 am. As required by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) train conductors use their horns in a standardized manner when approaching street crossings, emitting four horn blasts that are between 96 and 110 decibels. This is equivalent to the sound of a jet taking off or a rock concert. The train horns severely disrupt evening activities and wake up area residents on a nightly basis. There are approximately 11,415 residents living in this impacted area. In 2020, the pandemic further compounded the problem, as my constituents complied with the stay-at-home order. In addition to lowering productivity, the effects of noise pollution, sleep deprivation, and stress are known to have long-term health consequences.

Local and state elected officials, community members, and even my office have made attempts to discuss the schedule change and train horn noise issue with UPRR. But, due to FRA requirements to use the train horn in residential areas and the lack of legal obligations on railroad companies to make schedule modifications even in circumstances such as the ones described, UPRR has continued to carry out its increased service schedule.

Train horns serve an important purpose in preventing tragic rail injuries and fatalities. But, as evidenced by the thousands of calls and letters I have received from my constituents about them in the last three years, they can also be detrimental to communities. I encourage the Committee to examine new and emerging technologies and methods that can be used to mitigate the negative impact of horns on communities near railroad tracks and alternatives to traditional train horns.

The increase in train activity in growing communities like the ones in my district also poses a significant safety risk. San José's Japantown is one of the last three surviving Japantowns in the United States and a popular destination for both locals and the region known for its rich culture and unique small businesses. There are several high-density mixed-use developments around the rail crossings in this area that are anticipated to complete construction this year. There will also be over 19,000 square feet of retail and a public park, causing an influx of pedestrian and vehicular activity in this area.

The City of San José and local residents have shared concerns about the lack of sufficient rail crossing safety measures as train service in the area has increased. One of the crossings is lacking complete railroad crossing vehicle gates. All the crossings are lacking pedestrian treatments. This is why I will be seeking Member Designated Project Request funding from the Committee to allow the City to build out the superior safety measures that will reduce the potential for train incidents with vehicles or pedestrians.

Thank you.