

Sherman Street Railroad Crossing Update

July 10, 2018

Recently, the MBTA Commuter Rail (which is operated by Keolis) started sounding the train horns at the Sherman Street crossing in North Cambridge. This change in procedures has caused significant concern for local residents. The City wanted to provide the community with an update on this situation.

To fully understand the situation, it is important to provide some brief background:

- In 2005, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) passed a new train horn regulation to increase safety at grade crossings. This rule significantly tightened the procedures for maintaining or creating a quiet zone at a railroad grade crossing.
- Prior to this time, the Sherman Street grade crossing had been a no-horn location, but the new train horn rule removed that designation and would have required train horns to be sounded. At the time, the City was granted a one year extension to the no-horn location, through the summer of 2006.
- From what we can determine, no further action was taken by the City, the MBTA, or the FRA and the crossing continued to operate without train horns past the original summer 2006 extension because the issue was not raised and no change in operating practices took place.

This operating practice of not sounding the train horns continued until very recently, although per the train horn rule and the lack of any further extension (which would not have been granted even if it had been requested), the horns should have been sounded from summer 2006 forward. The current change in operating practice appears to be related to an audit conducted by Keolis, which determined that there is no quiet zone designation for this location, leading to the decision to start sounding the horns again, since there are significant penalties associated with violating the train horn rule. As a result, from the MBTA/Keolis perspective, it is necessary to continue to sound the horns unless/until a quiet zone is established at this location.

Based on this history, City staff are working as quickly as possible to develop plans for establishing an official quiet zone at this location, which requires the installation of specific Supplemental Safety Measures (SSMs), which will mitigate the risk of a train/vehicle collision occurring at this crossing. The quickest SSM that we can install is a quick-build median treatment, which will physically prevent cars from traveling around the railroad gates by separating the two directions of traffic (one of the biggest concerns about railroad grade crossings with traditional gates across one side of the road is that cars can drive around the gates by going into the oncoming direction of traffic).

This treatment can be installed relatively quickly at a relatively low cost, although we are still working to confirm with the FRA that this SSM will sufficiently reduce the collision risk to allow the establishment of an official quiet zone (the FRA has the sole regulatory authority to approve a quiet zone, and neither the City or the MBTA/Keolis can do so on our own). The quick-build median has to be a minimum length to qualify as an SSM, and may have an impact on access to nearby driveways, particularly on the south side of the crossing, as well as to parking). As a result, we view this as a short-term solution that might be supplanted by a different treatment in the future, depending on relative costs and impacts. However, recognizing the immediate disruption this is causing for nearby residences, we believe that this is the best next step, allowing us to establish the quiet zone (pending FRA approval) and then investigate other options in the longer-term.

Based on this recommendation, the City will be moving forward with these next steps:

- Discussions with abutters, particularly those that would be directly impacted by the installation of the quick-build median.
- Continued discussions with the FRA and the MBTA/Keolis about officially establishing a quiet zone.
- Procuring the materials necessary to install a quick-build median on either side of the crossing.

Assuming that all of those steps are completed successfully, the City would then move forward with installation of the median and establishment of the quiet zone. Staff are working to move this forward as quickly as possible.

We recognize that the noise from the horns is disturbing residents at all hours of the day, and are therefore moving as quickly as possible to install a solution that will allow the MBTA/Keolis to stop sounding the train horns. At the same time, we recognize the safety hazards created by grade crossings that do not meet the current standards for a quiet zone, and therefore want to ensure that we install the proper safety measures to resolve this situation.