

A PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP GONE RIGHT

Private Citizens and public organizations can work together and accomplish the impossible, and that is what resulted when the North County Transit District worked with a group of residents from Del Mar to reduce the train horn noise.

The Federal Railroad Act dictates train horn decibel levels at railroad crossings. In Del Mar, local residents decided to look into options to minimize the noise that pervaded the community. The group approached the city of Del Mar and formally requested to be recognized as a community group. Del Mar advised that the issue had been explored in the past, but welcomed the community involvement so long as the city would not incur any financial obligation in any outcome.

Our first premise was to establish the principle that safety was paramount and that safety would always trump nuisance. But there was no reason that a horn had to blast a 360 degree sound pattern greater than 92 decibels for one-quarter mile in either direction of a railroad crossing in order to have safety of 92 decibels within 100 feet of the center of the 15th street intersection as dictated by Federal statute.

A series of 29 meetings over a period of two years were organized. Both the NCTD engineers and Del Mar staff members periodically devoted time to the committee, which then provided formal reports at city council meetings. Many committee meetings were held around the kitchen table evaluating technologies and tactical approaches. A stationary wayside horn technology was identified and tested at the expense of a technology supplier.

Politicians, reporters, community citizens, and even Federal Railroad Authority staff were invited. No cost to taxpayers. No burdensome bidding process.

The Quiet Zone Committee arranged for sound meters (some on smartphone apps) with many residents standing on the porches of homes along the track. It was a true grass-roots effort, as some actually stood on their lawns and the grass at Powerhouse Park. The results were quite encouraging.

In order to move from theory to metrics our committee needed to know actual costs. No public entity had the budget necessary for a speculative cost analysis, yet incurring the cost for engineering was essential to get us closer to a finish line. The committee published notices of certain meetings and did focus-group mailings to the community, with all costs borne by committee

members who even reached into their own pockets to pay NCTD the \$17,548 required to prepare a formal engineering analysis of the proposed/tested solution.

The NCTD staff worked with our committee at every step. The Del Mar city manager and city attorney drafted documents for eventual execution. The governmental entities contributed support, while the committee and community members advanced the “high-risk” working capital.

Once the construction budget was determined, refined and reviewed by stakeholders, the committee drafted informal, nonbinding, community donor subscription agreements to enable community funding. The Del Mar Foundation was invited to take an active role so as to assure integrity in the process and joined in many meetings in the kitchens and living rooms.

Eventually, when community contribution agreements approached 50 percent of the anticipated costs, the NCTD board of directors, upon presentation from Matt Tucker and staff engineers, agreed to activate a pilot installation and provided matching funds from a federal grant. The equipment was ordered and installed, and today the horn sounds where it is needed: within the intersection as opposed to on an approaching train. Safety is protected, even potentially enhanced, as the conductors still have their horn and can use it when they see a threat on the tracks. Now, in addition to sound control, there is safety redundancy as both automatic, location-based horns and train-based horns are utilized.

The success of our public-private partnership with the NCTD seems to be a textbook case of how private citizens and agency staff can add tremendous value and enable community benefit. At a time when municipal budgets, schools and community services are at risk, community actions and public-private partnerships can accomplish the impossible. The county of San Diego recently issued a proclamation for a Matt Tucker Day and provided certificates of appreciation to commemorate this significant community effort.

Thank you, Matt Tucker, the NCTD staff and the city of Del Mar!

The Quiet Zone Committee; Hershell Price and Lee Stein, co-chairs Pete Glaser, Don Coordt, Larry Richards, Bryce Rhodes, Jim Benedict, Casey Sullivan