

**WEEKLY INFORMATION PACKET
MEMORANDUM**

To: Mayor Ruzzin and Members of Council

From: Frank Bruno, City Manager
Stephanie Grainger, Deputy City Manager
Ruth McHeyser, Acting Planning Director
Maureen Rait, Director of Public Works for Development and Support Services
Tracy Winfree, Director of Public Works for Transportation
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Date: October 5, 2006

RE: Information Item – Freight Train and Commuter Rail Noise

Executive Summary

On occasion, the city receives complaints regarding horn noise caused by freight trains. One particular strategy that communities along the US36 corridor, including Boulder, have recently been investigating is the feasibility of implementing a federal “quiet zone” program as part of a possible strategy from RTD’s Northwest Rail Environmental Assessment (NREA). RTD’s NREA will assess impacts of RTD’s future commuter rail service and may propose mitigation strategies.

“Quiet zones” are a very new Federal Railroad Administration rule (FRA) that allows municipalities to apply to the FRA to silence train horns at crossings. The process is so new that no communities in Colorado have applied, and few in the U.S. have obtained approval to silence the horns. Arvada, Brighton and Winter Park are the only three known communities in Colorado that have seriously considered applying for a quiet zone process, possibly in 2007 or 2008 but have not yet decided, primarily due to the high expense involved. Winter Park recently determined it was too expensive to pursue. The application process is quite extensive, expensive and has significant potential liability issues, with safety being the number one concern and priority.

While the idea of quiet zones is very appealing, the community must consider the trade-offs of safety, liability and cost with the benefits of the program. Brighton and Arvada have more serious freight train traffic and noise issues, and they have not decided if it is their best interest yet to pursue the quiet zone application process and pay for the improvements to meet quiet zone requirements. There has been discussion amongst communities along the proposed RTD commuter rail corridor, that there may be potential for a regional strategy to pursue quiet zones or other rail noise mitigation. The city of Boulder will continue, along with other communities along the US 36 commuter rail corridor, to monitor the RTD rail studies and pursue appropriate strategies to mitigate future impacts that may be caused by commuter rail.

Background

Currently, Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) operates approximately seven freight trains per day in the city of Boulder on BNSF railroad tracks. In addition, RTD is proposing new commuter rail service to operate on the existing Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) railroad tracks between Denver and Boulder (and north to Longmont) as part of RTD's FasTracks program. The likelihood of RTD implementing commuter rail is very high, following FasTracks approval by voters in 2004. Implementation of commuter rail service has been proposed by RTD to begin in 2015. Peak hour train service is proposed for 15 minute frequencies between Denver and Boulder and 30 minute frequencies from Boulder to Longmont, with off-peak frequencies of every 30 minutes from Denver to Boulder and every 60 minutes from Boulder to Longmont. These frequencies are subject to change, as the project moves forward. This equates to possibly 104 to 110 commuter rail train trips per day operating on the existing BNSF freight rail tracks in Boulder. RTD has identified possible commuter rail stations at the 63rd & Arapahoe area, in the Gunbarrel area by the Diagonal Highway, and at 30th & Pearl (north of Goose Creek, south of Valmont).

While there are many obvious community benefits with new commuter rail service, there is also probability for increased noise impacts. RTD will be conducting a Northwest Rail Environmental Assessment beginning in early 2007, which will include information on possible commuter rail impacts due to noise and vibration and may explore possible mitigation strategies. RTD projects completion of the rail study in 2008. In addition, as part of RTD's earlier work on a US 36 Environmental Impact Study, some preliminary research was conducted on rail noise which can be found on their website: www.us36eis.com

In the interim, property owners and developers are being encouraged to consider strategies to minimize noise and vibration impacts if they are considering developing properties near rail corridors. Additional information will continue to become available as studies for the RTD transit system are completed. In addition, the city and other communities along the rail corridor are monitoring and participating in RTD's US 36 EIS and Northwest Rail Environmental Assessment studies. The city, along with other partnering cities on the US 36 corridor, plan to comment on commuter rail impacts and will be advocating for RTD to assist communities on implementing rail noise mitigation strategies.

It may also be important to mention, that besides the horn noise, commuter rail is generally considered quieter than freight trains, particularly with the new rail propulsion and rail car technologies that RTD is considering for this corridor.

Public Involvement Opportunities

The US 36 Transportation Management Organization (US 36 TMO) hosted a workshop in July, 2006 to help educate US 36 communities about the new federal quiet zone rule. The US 36 TMO will be assisting communities in future discussions about regional approaches to rail noise mitigation.

In addition, RTD's Northwest Rail Environmental Assessment (EA) will include public meetings and other opportunities for public involvement and input on rail noise and possible mitigation

strategies. RTD plans to start the EA process in early 2007 with completion in 2008. The public process is anticipated to begin in the first quarter of 2007.

Next Steps

If you have any questions at this time, please contact Micki Kaplan, Transportation Planner, at ext. 4162 or at kaplanm@bouldercolorado.gov .