

Horns and a Dilemma

Written by Francisco Alvarado, BT Contributor
October 2018

Train blasts continue to rile Brightline's neighbors



The horn on the Brightline train lets out a jarring brass belch as it crosses the intersection near Ives Dairy Road and Biscayne Boulevard. The time: 2:30 a.m. on a recent Tuesday.

Mark Robson is jolted from his sleep by the blast.

“Here is the perfect example of why I’m so frustrated,” says Robson, an activist in the Ojus neighborhood of unincorporated north Miami-Dade. “The silver lining of all these intersection closings during Brightline’s construction was that we would at least get some peace and quiet when all these improvements were completed.”

Based on numerous conversations and e-mails he’s had with Brightline officials, Robson says he expected the fast-moving trains to adhere to a federal no-horn policy when the company began running its service in Miami-Dade this past May. Five months later, he and thousands of county residents along the Biscayne Corridor near Brightline’s tracks are still waiting for that implementation of the policy.

Specifically, Robson and his neighbors at the Skylake and Highland Lake condominium complex have been waiting on Miami-Dade County to apply for a “Quiet Zone” exemption from the federal Train Horn Rule that would prohibit the use of horns from NE 79th Street to NE 215th Street.

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For that to happen, Brightline had to finish adding safety equipment and infrastructure improvements to every street intersection its trains cross. And even though company officials insist those improvements have been completed, it will be at least another month before Miami-Dade can begin the application process for the quiet zone.

“Once all the crossings pass inspection, then the county will be able to submit the paperwork to the Florida Railroad Administration for the establishment of the quiet zone,” says Karla Damien, spokeswoman for the Miami-Dade Transportation and Public Works Department. “There’s one crossing that’s currently in the vicinity of an active construction project, which Miami-Dade County will need to re-inspect once construction has concluded. Construction is scheduled to end in November.”



The delay in implementing the quiet zone has exasperated northeast Miami-Dade residents beyond Robson’s neighborhood, according to Frank Rollason, a resident of Miami’s Belle Meade neighborhood. Rollason played a key role in getting the City of Miami and Florida East Coast Industries (FECI), Brightline’s owner, to obtain federal approval for a quiet zone between NE 71st Street and PortMiami for freight trains.

“People I know in Miami Shores and El Portal complain all the time about it,” Rollason says. “Nobody’s happy about the noise. It’s more frequent and it’s an issue, no doubt about it. I didn’t think it would take this long.”

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Rollason, who was named assistant director of the Miami-Dade County Emergency Management Department in June, says he brought up the quiet zone when he spoke with Brightline executives in early September about the capability of its trains for hurricane evacuations. “They felt [the quiet zone] wouldn’t be in place until the end of the year,” he says. “There was still some work that had to be done at the intersections.”

The mandated safety improvements include the installation of four-quadrant gates that completely block the roadway at railroad crossings. Miami-Dade has tapped \$1.5 million in federal grants to install new equipment and infrastructure, such as medians, new railroad signals, and 50 signposts alerting train conductors that they’re entering a quiet zone. FECI claims it has invested around \$60 million on safety measures for cross streets between Miami and West Palm Beach.

Ensuring the safety of motorists and pedestrians has become a thorny issue for Brightline, and has taken precedence over the quiet zone. Between July 2017 and April 2018, Brightline trains hit eight people, killing six, during test runs and regular trips. Five of the deaths were in Palm Beach County.

Since then, there have been three more accidents, two involving cars that were mangled by oncoming trains. No one was injured in those incidents, although an individual walking along the tracks September 18 in West Palm Beach was grazed by a train and sustained minor injuries.

In an e-mail statement, Brightline spokeswoman Ali Soule writes, “Brightline’s top priority is safety. We continue our outreach and are focused on educating the public about how to stay safe around railroad tracks.”

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