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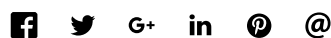
Ear training: quiet zone leaves some longing for train's 'music'

By Mack Burke Transcript News Editor 1 hr ago



Joy Hampton / The Transcript

Trains have gone quiet in Norman.



The train horns were silenced last week by the implementation of the city's long sought quiet zone.

The silence has been golden for some, but others miss the familiar sound — people like Donann Toler Alexander who said she has listened to them for 71 years, and Dennis Smith, who lives about a mile away and could pick out the sound of the Heartland Flyer from the rest.

"I loved the sound of the train horns," Smith said.

For some, it's a situational love-hate relationship. Nathan Thompson said he loves them when he's at home, but on The Mont's patio, not so much.

Some, like Toni Peery, see it as a matter of choice, and perceive their removal to be a safety hazard. Peery grew up on the corner of Castro Street and Jones Avenue.

"That's about as close as you get to the tracks and horns," he said. "If you don't like trains don't move by the tracks."

Though it's certainly much louder next to the tracks, the sound carries far across the city's flat terrain. According to the Federal Railroad Administration, the sound of a freight train horn registers about 110 decibels within 100 feet and 50 decibels at 1,000 feet. And many people in the Indian Hills Road area have reported that it's still blasting away.

While the sound has a romanticized and familiar quality to some, it was nuisance for many, enough for the city to make the necessary modifications to implement the quiet zone, which requires a safety precaution be added for every one removed.

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Additional signs and medians were added and conductors are still allowed to blow the horn at their discretion, but the policy discourages the wanton blasting that was required by law before the new measures were implemented.

Ward 7 city council member Stephen Tyler Holman — whose ward includes 6 of the city's 17 railroad crossings — said the process included safety studies and a great deal of public input. He said it took years and overwhelmingly reflects the community's desire for peace and quiet.

Holman lives by the train. He said he doesn't miss it.

"Out of a 24-hour day, the train horn in Norman is blowing for two-and-a-half hours. Over 30 trains come through Norman a day. So, one thing about the sentimental aspect that people may be forgetting is that a long time ago there were a lot fewer trains coming through Norman. And they had a steam-powered whistle.

"Now, we have one coming through about every 30 minutes and it's a high-powered electronic horn, 24 hours a day."

Holman said train traffic in Norman is trending up and could double in the next 15 years. Still, despite all of that, he said understands the sentimental effect.

"What I don't understand are some of the outlandish and false comments people have made about safety, and how people are going to get killed every day and the city is going to be liable for millions of dollars ... That's what I don't really understand," he said.

It's a polarizing issue for some residents, but for musicians and performers, the quiet zone has put an end to the biggest upstager in town.

Jeremy Wance, of the American Organ Institute and the University of Oklahoma School of Music, said countless recordings at Catlett Music Center have been botched by train horns.

At The Depot, a train station to be fair, Executive Director Shari Jackson said performers were regularly derailed by the horn, which wouldn't have been so bad for the noise if it didn't produce a "musical" chord.

Sooner Theatre Executive Director Jennifer Baker said she once had a romantic attachment to the horn.

"That lasted about two weeks," she said.

Some of the theatre's performances have utilized the distraction with off-the-cuff jokes and silver lining moments, but Baker said it's a welcome change.

"It's definitely a big distraction," she said. "Safety is first, but I know they've done their due diligence and wouldn't put people in harm's way."

Over the weekend, the Sooner Theatre put on a production of "The Wedding Singer," its first-ever without its loudest, unsanctioned cast member. It was actual music to the audience's ears.

But the train's "music" is a sound some will never let go. After 10 years working as a train hostess at The Depot, Donna Jones knows what song she'll miss most.

"The whistle sound of the Heartland Flyer has such a haunting, beautiful whistle ... Freighters are just loud, obnoxious horns. But the Heartland Flyer was almost a melody," she said.

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