

Wildwood wants to be whistle-stop

Yellowhead County applies for exemption to silence trains travelling through hamlet

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In the hamlet of Wildwood, residents who've been holding their ears and complaining for years about train whistles may soon get some relief.

Over the last seven years, the two level railway crossings in the hamlet 112 kilometres west of Edmonton have been equipped with increased safety measures such as flashing lights, bells and crossing arms, as well as fencing, said Yellowhead County Mayor Gerald Soroka.

"Once you try to address all these safety issues, then you can make the application towards getting the train whistles stopped," Soroka said.

The county is following Transport Canada's guidelines to apply for a whistling exemption. CN Rail and Transport Canada will have to do a safety audit to make sure trains can stop whistling safely, said Yellowhead County chief administrative officer Jack Ramme.

Wildwood resident Pat Di Marcello, a former Yellowhead County councillor, has pushed to have the whistles silenced for more than six years. Her file of research includes decibel readings recorded several years ago by local resident Brian Howe.

"Anything around 85 (decibels) is reason for concern for hearing impairment, and the readings he had taken, none of them were below 89," Di Marcello said Tuesday.

"The length of the horn or whistle varies from conductor to conductor. Some of them really let that horn go through the hamlet."

There are two public crossings in the hamlet and trains are required under federal law to sound their whistles before each one. That means each train has to sound its whistle twice as it passes through the community of about 300 people, said Di Marcello.

"So, basically it stops and then it starts again within a few seconds because it has to blow again before the next crossing."

Yellowhead County Coun. Ewald Kwirant represents the Wildwood area and has been involved in a business located right beside the tracks for almost 40 years. Sometimes the train whistles are "extremely, ridiculously loud," Kwirant said. The noise ruins the quality of life for people who live close by, he said.

"It definitely affects the hearing. For anybody that's close to it, that is a concern," he said. "If you're on the phone, conversation stops because the noise drowns it out."

CN runs between 24 and 30 trains each day through Wildwood, depending on customer demand, said CN spokesman Warren Chandler.

"Our conductors sound the train's horn along the track if they perceive any other safety issues, such as a trespasser or an animal on the tracks," Chandler said. "Whistles are a safety feature. We do it for safety reasons."

Locomotive whistles are manufactured to meet specific sound level and tone requirements.

"The whistles on all locomotives manufactured since 1982 are push-button controlled to provide a consistent sound level," according to a CN brochure.

Last month, Di Marcello and Howe spoke at a council meeting on behalf of Wildwood residents asking that the county try to get the whistles stopped. The county hopes the safety audit will be done this month and a whistling exemption within hamlet boundaries will follow soon after, Ramme said. Transport Canada gets from five to 10 exemption requests each year.

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