

New West hopes to sleep again after whistles stop

Two of the noisiest train crossings will fall silent next month

For years, New Westminster residents have complained about the nighttime whistle-blowing of trains as they rumble through the Fraser River city. As the city grew more dense along the river and in Queensborough, the level of complaints rose in proportion to those whose sleep was interrupted.



James Crosty, former Quayside Community Board president, is one of many who have fought to silence the nighttime whistles of trains in New Westminster. The city is close to quieting two of the worst crossings.

But starting next month, two of the noisiest crossings in the city will fall silent as a long-sought whistle-cessation program kicks in.

“The quality of life is going to improve for residents,” said New West Coun. Chuck Puchmayr. “You are not going to have the lengthy four-toot Morse code whistles anymore.”

When the city finishes a \$9-million reconstruction of Front Street in July following the removal of a parkade, two nearby railway crossings at Front and Begbie and Front and Fourth Street that have attracted the most complaints will be modified with crossing arms and physical barriers. Two other crossings that traverse the Fraser through Queensborough will also be modified, but won’t get mechanical equipment for another eight months.

It may be the beginning of the end of a long fight residents of New Westminster have had to quiet the railways adjacent to residential areas. There are no fewer than 15 spots in New

Westminster where lines used by Canadian Pacific, Canadian National, Southern Railway and Burlington North- Santa Fe intersect with roads or pedestrian walkways. Under the Railway Act and the Canadian Railway Operating Rules, trains are obligated to sound a whistle at each location. But in a small city of 18 square kilometres, the constant use of loud air-driven horns has set up arguments between residents, the city and the railways. At one point, residents complained to the Canadian

Transportation Agency, which started an arbitration process.

The problem worsened as developers built tall towers along the waterfront next to a railway yard, essentially creating a canyon that amplified the noise and carried it to other parts of the city. There have been incidents of residents confronting train engineers and throwing items at the trains.

Peter Julian, the NDP MP for the area, has introduced private members' bills at least three times since 2010 to try to quiet the railways, but private members' bills rarely get adopted by Parliament. The fight for quiet has also led James Crosty — former president of the Quayside Community Board, which represents residents alongside the railway — to twice run for mayor, unsuccessfully.

Puchmayr, head of the city's railway advisory committee, said the whistle-cessation program is not cheap. The city put aside \$3 million to fund the construction of barriers and other mechanical means to prevent uncontrolled intrusions onto the railways. Southern Railway, which owns the crossings in Queensborough and the West End, has contributed to the project.

“The capital works on the whistle-cessation program at the two downtown crossings are near complete. Once Transport Canada and the railways have approved the works, the whistling will no longer be required unless there are trespassing or safety issues at the crossings,” said Roger Emanuels, the manager of design and construction for New Westminster.

New Westminster isn't the only city whose residents have complained about whistle noise. In 2011 the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and the Railway Association of Canada began a process of trying to de-escalate conflicts through education, better land use planning and whistle cessation programs.