Whatcom Watch

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Train Noise: Fairhaven Quiet Zone

courtesy: City of Bellingham

Pedestrians waiting at a crossing in Boulevard Park that was upgraded with safety features such as flashing signals, automated crossing control gates and pedestrian exit gates.

What Took So Long?

by Preston L. Schiller

The good news is that a train quiet zone for the south side of Bellingham, known as the "Fairhaven Quiet Zone" came into effect on March 10, 2025. (See the attached City of Bellingham press release.) The bad news is that it has taken the City of Bellingham almost 20 years to succeed in attaining the quiet zone for its south side — and, while a train quiet zone is planned for the tracks in the central part of the city (Waterfront Quiet Zone), no end for its completion is in sight.

Background

In 2005, the U.S. Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), in response to the 1994 (Al) Swift Rail Act (named after our former Congressional Representative who played a major role in its enactment), announced a new rule governing the sounding and volume of locomotive train horns where streets, trails and highways cross railroad tracks at grade. A decibel level and duration of horn sounding was standardized across the country. Prior to that some trains had noise levels well above 95 decibels, a few were below this level. The patterns and durations of sounding train horns varied widely.

Our local freight train (Burlington Northern Santa Fe or BNSF) and passenger railway service (Amtrak Cascades) might have had a noise level below 95 decibels, as once the new rule went into effect, the introduction of extremely loud train horn noise was quickly noticed by all who lived with earshot of the railroad tracks. And many reacted, individual citizens and impacted businesses, holding meetings, demanding that officials address this issue by creating

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Preston L. Schiller, Ph.D., has been a frequent contributor to Whatcom Watch since 1997, especially on issues related to transportation and the environment. He has taught courses in transportation planning at Western Washington University, Queen's University (Kingston, Ontario, Canada) and the University of Washington, Seattle. He is the principal author of "An Introduction to Sustainable Transportation: Policy, Planning and Implementation, 2nd Ed.," 2018, Routledge, Taylor & Francis.

Land Purchase Advances Lake Cleanup

by Meghan Fenwick

What does a family logger and the founder of a nonprofit dedicated to forest preservation have in common?

A shared understanding of the value of forested land adjacent to a vital watershed.

On February 14, the City of Bellingham's purchase of 754 acres of zoned residential and commercial forestry property was finalized. Nielsen Brothers Inc. sold the property for $3.65 million. The property borders Lake Whatcom Park below Stewart Mountain, and has not been clear-cut since the 1940s.

Michael Feerer, founder and board treasurer of Whatcom Million Trees Project (1), poured over the timber evaluation reports and found a mix of hemlocks, Douglas firs, and other native trees reaching up to 50 years old. The older the tree, the more ecological benefits, including carbon capture, reducing runoff and flooding and more.

These benefits are crucial in the city and county's efforts to clean up Lake Whatcom, which was placed on the list of polluted water bodies under the Clean Water Act in 1998. After a century and a half of European settlement and development in the watershed, phosphorus and other byproducts of human activity degraded the water quality past state and federal requirements.

The health of the lake not only has implications on the ecosystem, but it is a public safety concern — the lake provides drinking water for over 100,000 residents of Whatcom County. The lake water is pulled from two separate basins [The city of Bellingham pulls water from the 2nd basin, Sudden Valley pulls water from the 3rd basin] and is treated before reaching the tap. Bellingham invested over $1.6 million to upgrade a water treatment plant in 2018.

The biggest contributor to high levels of phosphorus is development in the watershed, where sediment is carried by rainwater to the lake. Annual reports from Western Washington University monitor indicators of the lake's health such as phosphorus, nitrogen, bacteria and dissolved oxygen.

The 2022/2023 report showed signs of progress, where many measurements stabilized or increased at a slower rate than years prior. (2)

The City of Bellingham credits Feerer for re-opening the door to negotiations with Nielsen Brothers Inc., after conversations fell flat a few years prior.

"Logging requires logging roads to access them, which create additional sediment pollution issues for the lake," said Feerer. "Logging also typically leads to herbicide spraying post-clear-cut to lessen competition by other plants among the next round of newly planted trees. Then, the process

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