

Submitter: Peter Fargo
On Behalf Of: Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon
Committee: Joint Committee On Transportation
Measure, Appointment or Topic: HB3231

Good evening, Co-Chairs, Senator Gorsek and Representative McLain, members of the Joint Committee, and fellow Oregonians.

My name is Peter Fargo, and I'm a resident of Baker City, Oregon. I represent Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon (or EMO), where I serve as Environmental Justice Coordinator. EMO is a statewide association of faith-based organizations — including over 1400 congregations, as well as ecumenical groups and interfaith partners — all working together to improve the lives of Oregonians.

I am writing in support of HB3231, because EMO generally supports efforts to expand passenger rail service where projects are consistent with EMO Social Principles -- for the Common Good, Community Well-Being, Economic Justice, and Environmental Stewardship.

HB3231 requires a passenger rail plan and outlines the plan elements. This is good governance. I would like to ask, though, whether passenger rail plans will be required to address other goals, such as equitable access for underserved communities and the role of passenger rail in meeting the state's commitments to reduce and eliminate pollution for all concerned. We would like to learn more about these aspects of the planning process.

Today I would also like to register questions about two sections of the bill from the perspectives of environmental justice and human rights. These sections are:

1(d): Strategies for boosting capacity; and

1(e): Strategies for upgrading and improving railroad track and related infrastructure.

Both are necessary to expand passenger rail service. However, where boosting capacity means more trains per day moving through a community, there are impacts. Those impacts can be mitigated by upgrading and improving infrastructure.

For example, train horns are a major impact on Baker City residents and thousands of Oregonians across the state. Trains are currently required to blast their horns four times as they approach each road / railroad crossing in our town. The horns release powerful sound waves of 110 decibels — a level medically proven as hazardous to human health. Loud horns are meant to be alarming, and they induce a stress response that contributes to heart disease over time. We have six crossings in Baker City, times four horns each, times approximately 25 trains per day. The result is hundreds of horns per day.

In Baker City, the train tracks run adjacent to our elementary school and blast their horns directly onto the playground, where my daughter is in 5th grade. The kids have to plug their ears, and teachers have to stop instruction when the trains go by. Studies show that persistent horns impact educational performance.

We live seven blocks from the tracks, and we are fortunate. Some people live zero, one, or two blocks away. Still, we wake up to the horn almost every night. When our son was born in 2019, our family struggled, in part because the horn sounded like a crying baby, so we missed precious opportunities to rest. When you can't sleep, you know that it is as essential as food and water. This is about the bottom of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: meeting basic physiological needs. That is why we consider train horns to be a matter of environmental justice and basic human rights.

The Baker City community has been working to establish a Railroad Quiet Zone for six years. It has been a grinding bureaucratic process involving City, State, and Federal players. Communities like ours need more help from ODOT to navigate the Quiet Zone process and to work with the railroad companies. We also need funding to make the safety improvements to railroad crossings, which are required to establish a Quiet Zone.

I ask that you take these concerns into account in Sections 1(d) and 1(e). I would also ask for an opportunity to exchange more information with the Joint Committee to address the statewide need for additional Quiet Zone support.

Thank you very much for your service and for this opportunity to comment.