

The Bus Stops Here: An Alarming Signal

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Tragedy befell Madison Metro Transit and the UW Community in June, 2011: A long-time, UW-Madison Library employee was struck and killed in the crosswalk by a Metro bus as she crossed University Ave. The driver was turning left and did not see the pedestrian in her blind spot.¹ Much soul searching followed. The overwhelming concern was to adopt a solution that would prevent such a disaster from ever happening again.

In 2012, Metro's solution was to begin installing on select buses, an audible warning system which was initially so loud it could be heard by passengers inside. The alarm went off every time the bus stopped or made a turn, which drove people crazy, but was much worse for drivers who were subjected to the noise all day. Metro management received enough negative feedback from operators and riders, that the sound was adjusted, and people inside were less affected by the noise.

However, people living or working near a bus route are still being subjected to the system's noise, which has been compounded by the fact that since 2013, Metro has been actively installing them on its entire fleet. To date, 154 out of 214 total buses have the external alarm system installed on them. It seems clear that Metro Management hasn't considered that extraneous noise can be harmful to health and disturbing to the public peace. We live in an increasingly noisy world, and that noise takes its toll on people in a variety of ways. Such disregard for the well-being of others in the name of safety is strongly egregious. The fact that Metro may also be in violation of Madison's current noise ordinance, is equally disturbing.

Most Metro buses run from 6 am to 11 pm, and some campus buses until 2 am on weeknights, and 3 am on weekends. This disrupts sleep for residents living near bus stops and turns, endangering their health and well-being, and diminishing their quality of life. People who are outdoors, or who are just trying to enjoy their day are similarly affected by extraneous, unnatural noise in the environment. Along with the existing overuse of beeping and chirping alarms on delivery, municipal, contractor, and construction vehicles, Metro Transit's alert system is adding to the noise already escalating throughout the city. This problem will only get worse for everyone once warmer weather comes, and windows and doors are open. Madison Metro will become known as the steadiest, most consistent culprit of noise in the city.

While safety is important, and is a facet often cited in livability ratings, "safety at any cost" should not be so overriding that it dominates or nullifies other factors. In order to remain a livable city, Madison's goal

¹ http://host.madison.com/wsj/news/local/crime_and_courts/article_278cd70a-e2e1-11e0-b4e8-001cc4c002e0.html

should be to foster the overall quality of life for its citizens. When a healthy balance is struck between safety and livability, the city's environment, including its audible soundscape, is respected and protected. In regards to this new alert system, which hasn't been subjected to the kind of scrutiny that something of such scale warrants, this doesn't seem to have been considered. In addition, Metro may be on thin ice legally.² An entire chapter of general city ordinances is devoted to "offenses against peace and quiet". Specifically, Metro may be in violation of ordinance 24.04.3(a) which states such noise making devices can only be used between noon-1:30 pm and 5:00-7:00 pm.

A large part of Metro's safety problem is, and has always been, common left and right blind spots on all large vehicles. Metro Transit drivers are therefore trained to be aware of this, to ensure that accidents, especially those involving pedestrians, don't happen. In 2012, Metro reported that "preventable and chargeable" accidents were down by fifty percent from the previous year, even with an increase in ridership. Metro staff attributed the reduction to an increase in training, the use of surveillance cameras for coaching, and an overall elevated quality of work by both supervisors and employees³. They did not attribute the decrease to the alert system, which at that time, had been installed on 30 buses. Since Metro did not report accident statistics for 2013 and the 2014 report has yet to be released, it is unclear what positive influence the sound alert system has had on reducing collisions with bicyclists and pedestrians.

At the heart of this matter is Metro's poor track record for soliciting public feedback and really **listening** to the people affected by their policies and decisions.⁴ Whose voice was heard by Metro on this matter? Did Metro involve the public or their elected representatives before deciding to invest in this alert system? It's hard to say. But luckily, Madison has a functioning oversight committee that is known to occasionally rein in what Metro thinks it wants to do.

So, the question remains: has Metro Transit's solution become Madison's problem? On June 10, 2015, 5 pm, Charles Kamp, Metro General Manager, will be presenting the case in favor of the alert system to the Madison Transit and Parking Commission at the Madison Municipal Building, Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd. Room 260. The public is encouraged to attend and speak out if they believe the answer to that question is "yes". There is a chance for getting the period of time the warning system is used reduced to day time/peak hours, based on Madison's existing noise regulations. This is also an opportunity to discuss other alternatives to the noise alert system, such as motion sensing equipment, video image processors, infrared, or microwave detectors to name a few, and/or simple, side strobe lights, especially effective for night time use. However, having people call, email, write letters, and/or attend this meeting is very important to facilitate this change.

Here's what you can do:

Attend the meeting:

June 10, 2015, 5 pm

Madison Municipal Building, Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd. Room 260

Use the Doty St. entrance after 6 pm

²https://www.municode.com/library/wi/madison/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=Chapter%2024%20-%20Offenses%20Against%20Peace%20and%20Quiet

³ <http://www.cityofmadison.com/metro/annualreports/2013.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.madisoncommons.org/?q=content/the-bus-stops-here-customer-service-is-about-being-part-of-a-community>

Call or email your alderperson:

<http://www.cityofmadison.com/Council/councilMembers/alders.cfm>

Write Charles Kamp, General Manager, Madison Metro

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Hours: Monday - Friday from 7:30 AM - 5:30 PM

Email Gary Paulson, Chair, Transit and Parking Commission GaryPoulson@gmail.com