

LOCAL NOVEMBER 29, 2015

Bellingham hearing Dec. 1 on BNSF road closure plan

HIGHLIGHTS

BNSF wants to close Valley View Road rail crossing

Public hearing at 6 p.m. Tuesday in Whatcom County Council chambers

County is concerned closure would delay emergency vehicles



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BELLINGHAM — The public can comment Tuesday, Dec. 1, on a proposal to close a railroad crossing on Valley View Road.

The Utilities and Transportation Commission will hold a hearing about the closure at 9:30 a.m. Tuesday at the Whatcom County Courthouse council chambers on the first floor, 311 Grand Ave. The hearing could continue Wednesday, Dec. 2.

A public hearing on the matter will be 6 to 9 p.m. Tuesday in council chambers. Written comments will be accepted into the record as well.

BNSF requested the closure of the crossing a half mile south of Portal Way earlier this year so it could add a siding extension to the tracks that spur off the mainline between Bellingham and Vancouver, B.C., and head toward Cherry Point.

The railroad said in its request that the siding extension is needed so trains to the oil refineries don't block the main line, and so passenger trains can get through Custer without delays.

County officials believed the closure would be required later to make room for trains headed to a proposed coal terminal at Cherry Point, according to a March 10 letter to the commission requesting the hearing.

The county has expressed concerns that the closure could impact emergency vehicle response time, and that BNSF's traffic estimates for the road were different from measurements the county had.

It was also noted in a letter from Joe Rutan, assistant director of Whatcom County Public Works, that the refineries don't require the additional track for train storage, per their permits.

The parties have submitted evidence to the commission, including testimony about how the State Environmental Policy Act could come into play.

Documents related to the Valley View closure are online at utc.wa.gov. Type "150189" in the box that says "Enter docket number" to find them.

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