

Train enthusiasts to break ground for locomotive museum near OMSI

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Among the largest steam engines still in operation, the Spokane Portland Seattle 700, needs a new home; the Brooklyn “roundhouse” is to be torn down next year.

For a planned railroad history center in Portland, railroad owners gave the City of Portland three steam-powered locomotives back in 1958. But, as City leadership changed, those plans were sidetracked, and the powerful engines were left to languish - out of doors, rusting, and occasionally vandalized, on a siding near Oaks Amusement Park.

One of those locomotives, the Southern Pacific 4449, had gone into service in May of 1941. It was donated to Portland in 1958, and put on that 'static display'. Finally, the 'Friends of SP 4449' undertook a massive restoration effort - rewarded by the 4449 being chosen as the engine to spend a year or more pulling the 'American Freedom Train' around the United States to mark the American Bicentennial celebrations over a third of a century ago.

Today, early each December, the SP 4449 chugs and puffs to give merrymakers a ride through Oaks Bottom on the 'Holiday Express'.

Retired Union Pacific engineer Doyle McCormack still takes care of the SP 4449, along with a cadre of volunteers. But, he's since taken on new duties as President of the Oregon Rail Heritage Foundation (ORHF), as well.

The ORHF, McCormack explained, was founded in 1998 as an umbrella organization representing seven member organizations, all of which share an interest in finding a new home for all three steam locomotives owned by the City of Portland.

The participants include the Pacific Railroad Preservation Association, which began the task of restoring, maintaining, and operating the Spokane Portland Seattle 700, one of the largest of its kind still operating in the world.

'Where we have been located, the Brooklyn Roundhouse [just north of the Holgate Boulevard Viaduct over the Brooklyn Yard], is inaccessible to the public, and the Union Pacific plans to close it next January,' remarked McCormack. 'Having to move away from it is the 'fire in our boiler' that got us to take action.'

In late July, the Portland City Council agreed to extend the terms of an existing \$978,598 loan to the non-profit OHRF to buy land adjacent to the OMSI, between S.E. Water Avenue and the newly rebuilt Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard Viaduct.

'From there, we'll have track connections to both the local Oregon Pacific and the Union Pacific railroads, allowing us the freedom to go out on runs,' McCormack explained. 'That loan from the City helped us get started, and gave us the credibility to start a fundraising campaign. We've raised enough money now for 'Phase I' - a building that will be the permanent home for the steam locomotives. It's the start of what will become a Railroad Interpretive Center.'

With an architecture firm and building contractor on board, and the project now moving through the permitting process with the City of Portland, McCormack seemed confident that they'd break ground for the building as early as next month.

'The annual 'Holiday Express' excursions raise just enough money to 'keep the lights on' at ORHF,' explained Bill Weismann, coordinator of the fundraising campaign to build the new railroad interpretive center. 'We're continuing to raise funds to build out the first phase of the project, and then on to finish the project.'

This permanent home for the locomotives will provide safe and modern indoor facilities in which volunteers can maintain and restore the locomotives. 'More than this, it will provide access - for the first time ever - to the public, on an ongoing basis. If it were not for railroads, Portland wouldn't be the city it is today! Preserving these locomotives means saving part of Portland's heritage.'

The overall project cost is about \$5.3 million, McCormack pointed out. 'We have enough actual donations or commitments to allow us to sign the construction contract. But we still need another \$2.5 million to move the 'turntable', install tracks, and transport supplies to the new site.'

'Any size donation - anything from \$1 to \$1 million - will help,' Weismann promised. Learn more about the project, and to learn how to donate, go online to: www.orhf.org .