

Locomotive donations boost railroad group's bid to create park

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Talk about a big donation. It was so big, it came via semi tractor-trailer.

In April, the Las Vegas Railroad Society received two free locomotives and three coaches that are about 20 years old. One locomotive is a replica of trains used in the late 1800s with the big puffer-type smokestack.

The donation came from the Tropicana Express Hotel & Casino in Laughlin. Lee Beil, the society's treasurer, had a conversation with hotel executives around October 2010 and learned that they didn't need the train any longer. He was asked if he knew of anyone who could take it off their hands.

The society jumped at the chance, but things were nearly derailed when there was difficulty securing the funds to move it to Las Vegas. It asked for more time — then even more time.

"We were supposed to have this done by the end of 2011," said Beil, "and we couldn't ... we kept begging the executives at the Tropicana Express. (Society founder) Trudy (Platzer) did a good job of advising them of our problems. We stalled and managed to pacify them until this February, when they said, 'It has to go. If you can't take it, we're going to scrap it or give it to someone else.' That's when Trudy and everybody hit the panic button."

Platzer said the donation marks the next step toward the society's dream of a railroad park.

"I was very excited because it was the first corporate donation," she said. "Even though it wasn't cash, the value was \$1 million, and we still have memorabilia to bring up."

As it turned out, not only was the train free, so was its delivery. Pan Western Corp. provided the trucks and manpower to haul the pieces to Las Vegas. Vision Sign Inc. provided the crane, and its operators worked for free. Sunbelt Rentals' air

compressor rental was discounted at 75 percent.

It took a crew of about 20 to see to the operation in Laughlin. Platzer and her husband, Bruno, plus four other volunteers, drove to Laughlin to be there as the train was loaded. It could not be transported by railroad because it requires a narrow-gauge track.

The move took three days of preparation, including removing the puffer stack. Perhaps the most strategic part was positioning the cranes to pick up the train and place it onto the track already secured on a flatbed. It didn't help that it was raining that day.

Sometimes, the trucks had to be moved to within an inch of other pieces of equipment, Platzer said. She said the Pan Western crew did not share her trepidation, as they had moved railroad equipment before.

When everything was loaded up, the trucks headed for Las Vegas. The Platzers followed the convoy transporting the train denuded of its puffer stack.

"Each time they came to an underpass, I was so nervous, they were just inches away from hitting the bridge," she said. "But they knew what they were doing."

Mitchell Truman, president and CEO of Pan Western, said the biggest concern for the move was dealing with traffic.

"We did it on a weekend when everybody could get together, and the biggest thing was the motorhomes coming and going from the Laughlin area," he said. "We had to be very careful to stay out of their way and have them stay out of our way."

The caravan traveled at 65 mph and used U.S. Highway 93 to avoid the Hoover Dam area. The company has dealt with train lovers before.

"We call them 'foamers' - a train aficionado," Truman said. "When he looks at one, he's so excited, he begins to foam at the mouth because it brings out the child (in him)."

The train arrived in Las Vegas on April 14.

The society has seen its momentum flounder since the economy plummeted in 2007. Just when it entered into a deal with the city of Las Vegas to operate on 200 acres of land near Bruce Trent Park, 8851 Vegas Drive, everything came to a halt.

"When you go through four years of being turned down because of the recession, and then suddenly this happens, it means a lot," said Platzer. "And now we're looking for other corporations to team up with us and discuss creating this family facility."

Education is expected to be a big part of the proposed Railroad Heritage Park. It will support educational field trips and include a mine and tunnel features.

"We'll attract a new kind of tourist," Platzer said. "... I really think this project will see ... you have railroad enthusiasts, historians coming to town and tourists coming to town (who will visit the park) ... and we'll create jobs," Platzer said.

Phase one of what she called Las Vegas' official railroad museum will include four miles of track and a round house that will double as an educational program building. There also will be a station there.

The organization could provide no timeline on when that might break ground. Its next phases are also dependent on the economy's recovery, but Platzer said each one would add more miles of track. She could not be specific, as plans have been re-evaluated the past few years due to the recession.

The last phase will see construction of a mining museum. Originally, the total amount required to build the park was estimated at \$26 million. That, too, is in flux.

"It can be way up," Platzer said.

She said the project, when complete, will include 30-plus acres and a Victorian botanical garden and will utilize as many as eight miles of track. There will be two different sizes of track. The larger one is one-third scale and the smaller, one-eighth scale. Various train models will be used, including diesel and steam.

"We're re-enacting the era; the emphasis is how Las Vegas got started," she said.

The location of the donated railroad equipment is not being disclosed to avoid any vandalism.

For more information about the Las Vegas Railroad Society, visit lasvegasrailroadsociety.org.

Contact Summerlin/Summerlin South View reporter Jan Hogan at jhogan@viewnews.com or 387-2949.

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