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TOP STORY

The allure of train travel: Meeting conducted to bring passenger train service back to NE Oregon

By Dick Mason The Observer Oct 28, 2019 Updated Oct 29, 2019

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Jon Nuxoll, president of the Association of Oregon and Transit Advocates, speaks at the start of Saturday's Eastern Oregon Rail Summit at Cook Memorial Library.

By Dick Mason The Observer

Cook Memorial Library's community room was probably as crowded late Saturday morning as the Union Pacific Railroad depot in La Grande was on Sept. 27, 1937, when people gathered there for the train carrying President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to arrive.

FDR was asleep when his train stopped in La Grande around 12:30 a.m., but First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt did appear and spoke briefly to the crowd.

Few if any of the more than 100 people at La Grande's library Saturday were the same ones who saw FDR's train arrive in 1937, but many lived here when La Grande had passenger train service. The desire to see passenger rail service return to Northeast Oregon is what drew the crowd to Saturday's Eastern Oregon Rail meeting, which was held to inform people how they could help bring back Amtrak's passenger service.

Those in the audience included an individual who wrote on a display paper asking people why they want passenger train service to return: "I'm 79 — don't know how much longer I can drive long distances. I need to travel monthly to Boise and Portland."

This 79-year-old and many others at the meeting learned what steps need to be taken to make this dream become a reality during a program put on by the all-volunteer nonprofit Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates, with help from All Aboard Washington. AORTA is proposing to revive at least the Portland to Boise portion of the old Amtrak Pioneer route, which was discontinued in 1997 because of funding issues.

"We need your help if (the return of passenger train service) is going to happen. It will be a longer term effort," said AORTA President Jon Nuxoll of Eugene.

The need for passenger train service in Northeast Oregon is greater now than it was in 1997, Nuxoll said. A big reason is that Greyhound Bus now provides one westbound and one eastbound bus a day, while 22 years ago at least two westbound and two eastbound buses made daily stops in La Grande.

Nuxoll would like to see as much of the Pioneer route, which ran from Portland to Salt Lake City, Utah, restored as possible. However, he said it is more realistic to start small by first attempting to restore the Portland to Boise part of the Pioneer route.

The AORTA president said that when people are speaking up in support of Amtrak, they need to address one of the most common criticism of it – that its subsidized with government funding. This is a weak and unfair argument, according to Nuxoll, because all modern transportation receives substantial government funding.

“All transportation is subsidized,” he said.

He explained that virtually all highway construction and maintenance is funded by the government and that air travel is possible because of airports, which receive significant levels of government assistance.

Nuxoll emphasized that the best way to get members of Congress to begin looking into expanding Amtrak’s routes is for local city councils and county commissions to pass resolutions in support of having local and regional passenger rail service. He said that when senators and members of congress learn of the resolutions they will know that the people they represent want passenger trains to return.

Mark Meyer of Portland, an AORTA board member, said he believes there is strong bipartisan support in Congress for expanding Amtrak.

One of these leaders is U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Portland, who is a supporter of Amtrak, according to Jeff Broderick, a graduate student at Portland State University who is earning a master's degree in urban planning. He also noted that U.S. Rep. Peter Defazio, D-Eugene, who is chair of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, is in a good position to help boost Amtrak's expansion.

Broderick, like other speakers at Saturday's meeting, emphasized the importance of communicating with legislators about restoring Amtrak service in Northeast Oregon.

"Your first step should be contacting your legislators," he said.

He said that part of the problem Amtrak faces is that it received a weak mandate from the government when it was created in 1971. This makes it difficult to get large sums of money from Congress.

"It is a fight for it to get funding from Congress each year," Broderick said.

Many of those attending the meeting Saturday talked of how much they miss passenger train service, and the atmosphere in the library's community room was one of hope and excitement.

"You have priceless enthusiasm," said Louis Musso, a member of All Aboard Washington.

Dick Mason

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Beats include the communities of North Powder, Imbler, Island City and Union, education, Union County veterans programs and local history. Dick joined The Observer in 1983, first working as a sports and outdoors reporter.