

“Holiday Express” steam locomotives still looking for a home

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Providing a total of 10,000 passengers a trip back into another era, the Southern Pacific 4449 roared to life at Oaks Park again this past Holiday season.

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Standing seventeen feet tall, on 80-inch-high wheels, the massive, 100-foot long Southern Pacific 4449 steam locomotive is an impressive sight.

As the engineer released the brakes and the steam hissed from the pistons, the ground trembled, and the 4449 began another “Holiday Express” run from Oaks Amusement Park to OMSI and back.

For two weeks in December, the Holiday Express allowed visitors – some traveling from as far away as Seattle – the opportunity to step back in time, and ride the rails to the chug, chug, chug sound of a steam locomotive.

As riders traveled Dick Samuels’ Oregon Pacific Railroad Company tracks along the east bank of the Willamette River, they took in unique views of the downtown Portland on one side, and the serenity of the Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge on the other.

After being donated to the city in the 1950’s, when diesel-electric locomotives replaced steam locomotives, the SP-4449 sat outside on public display at Oaks Park for many years.

Members of the Oregon Rail Heritage Foundation refurbished the locomotive, and continue to maintain and run the locomotive for the love of it. It eventually drew the “Bicentennial Train” around the United States in 1976. However, it burns about 10 gallons of fuel and uses 100 gallons of water per mile – an expensive ride.

ORHF was founded in 2000, we learned, with the mission of establishing a permanent home for these three city-owned historic steam locomotives, as well as to save the Brooklyn Roundhouse, and to build a rail and industrial heritage museum. This would create a place where these mechanical marvels could be put on display for generations to come.

The problem is that the Union Pacific, which has been donating the space to house the locomotives in the old, crumbling roundhouse just north of the S.E. Holgate viaduct over the Brooklyn train yard, now needs the space to meet its own needs. It has asked that the historic locomotives and other antique railcars at the same site be moved somewhere else.

One possibility is a spot of land with rails on it just east of OMSI on the Willamette’s east bank. But, though the railroad, which owns the property, seems positive about such

a use of that location, the money needed to accomplish the dream at that site has yet to be raised, and time is running out.

Without a destination, these unique, working artifacts of the nation's past, owned by the City of Portland, may have to be parked somewhere to rust in the rain and get tagged by graffiti vandals.

At this point, there is no evident solution to the problem. But if one is to be found, money will be needed. And the ORHF did make some money again this Holiday season – in all, some 10,000 tickets were sold during the train's annual run.

To make sure you're on their list for 2008, or to learn more about this new holiday tradition, or learn how you can support ORHF, check their website at: www.orhf.org