

Steam locomotive set to pass through Kalamazoo Sunday morning

By [Rex Hall Jr. | Kalamazoo Gazette](#)
July 18, 2009, 8:00AM

KALAMAZOO -- Like the rarity of seeing Halley's Comet or the phenomenon of next week's solar eclipse, a catch-it-while-you-can event will take place in Southwest Michigan on Sunday morning. The Southern Pacific 4449 steam locomotive will pass through the area on Amtrak's rail lines. The only surviving GS-4 class of steam locomotives will depart from Chicago at 9 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time and is expected to pass through Kalamazoo between 11:15 and 11:30 a.m., said Mark Tomlonson, president of the Kalamazoo Model Railroad Club.

The 475,000-pound locomotive -- which will be pulling a diesel engine and five to seven passenger cars -- is not scheduled to stop in Kalamazoo. Plans call for it to refuel between noon and 12:30 p.m. in the Canadian National Railway refueling station off Brigeben Drive in Battle Creek.

The engine is on its way from its home in Portland, Ore., to Trainfest '09 in Owosso and will follow a series of short-line rail lines between Battle Creek and its Shiawassee County destination. "It will be the first steam engine to pass through Kalamazoo since 1976, so for train buffs, this is a huge deal," said Tomlonson, who said the engine will slow from its 79 mph speed to 35 mph once it enters Kalamazoo.

The massive, 68-year-old locomotive will make a return pass through the area, on its way back to the Pacific Northwest, on July 31. Tomlonson said a time frame for the return was not yet known. Visually striking because of its bold black, red and orange color scheme, the SP 4449 will have a crew of two engineers, two firefighters and about six mechanics, Tomlonson speculated.

"Anybody who drives antique cars to car shows, you know anything can happen along the way, and the 4449 is no different," he said. "I'm sure while in Battle Creek the mechanics will be out inspecting the outside of the engine, checking out the bearings."

Tomlonson said people standing near the tracks as the engine passes will "feel the ground shake with every piston that hits." "It's a real special locomotive and, considering it's based out West, a rare opportunity to see it in our part of Michigan," he said.

To help offset costs to bring the train to Owosso, Southern Pacific sold tickets for passengers to ride the train from Minneapolis. The SP 4449 also will be carrying a diesel engine as required by Amtrak in case the steam engine develops mechanical problems.