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FEATURED

Transportation

Train trek pulls into Weiser

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All Aboard Northwest co-founders Charles Hamilton and Dan Bilka talk to attendees of Friday’s Train Trek event at the Weiser. Attendees learned about the group’s goals in bringing passenger rail service back to the Western Treasure Valley and its broader aims to the region of the U.S.

Corey Evan | Argus Observer

WEISER — On Friday, the Weiser Train Depot served as the venue for Train Trek, a series of

outreach and engagement meetings aimed at gathering support for the resumption of rail service between Colorado and the Pacific Coast. The events are organized by All Aboard Northwest, an advocacy group which is pushing for use of available federal funds to re-establish rail service in the Greater Northwest region of the U.S., from eastern Oregon to South Dakota.

The Weiser event was conducted by group co-founders Dan Bilka and Charles Hamilton, in an effort to gauge support for bringing back the Pioneer Line, which last operated in 1997. The group's message is summed up on its website by these three words: "People live here."

"It's been many years and you may be aware ... there is now, for the first time, an extraordinarily large amount of money available to return passenger rail service to places all over," said Hamilton to the crowd. "We want to take advantage of that and with the help of communities like yours, that will be possible."

Following are key benefits the group touts in its efforts to restore passenger rail.

- **Economy:** According to the group, communities with passenger rail service receive \$84 per day trip visitor and \$366 per overnight trip visitor in economic activity.
- **Environment:** The presentation highlighted the contribution of dust from vehicle tires to the die-off of salmon, noting that rail vehicles do not use tires.
- **Equity:** The group's goal is to improve the quality of life in the Greater Northwest as a result of restoring rail service.

Hamilton says in the several years he has been conducting these events, his expectations of community support continue to be exceeded. He went on to state that part of the effort to bring back service will involve matching federal funds locally, but that in some cases such need can be met through in-kind services, such as lending use of local facilities including existing train stations.

Bilka added that the benefits of rail service are most heavily felt in smaller cities than in bigger ones.

"Really, that passenger rail service is instrumental for linking in larger and smaller cities as

part of a regional network ... so you can get from here to there,” said Bilka. “Passenger rail is just one part of that system.”

“That includes buses, it includes bikes, it includes everything that’s appropriate for your community, but it includes trains,” said Hamilton.

Bilka and Hamilton highlighted an example of the potential for success in this venture by citing a 2022 example of service resumption in Vermont; There, an extension of the Ethan Allen Express Line to Burlington, Vermont and connecting the station to Albany, New York was completed after a 70-year absence of such service in Burlington.

The group visited Boise on Thursday, along with Stephen Gardner, CEO of Amtrak — with Hamilton noting it was 105 degrees there during that visit — and also visited Ontario on Saturday.

“[Gardner] basically said it’s up to the federal government, the federal railroad administration, to decide which services to bring back. But the ones that are going to be the most successful are going to be the ones that have community support. And he’s very convinced that the Pioneer Line is one of those areas.”

All Aboard Northwest was founded in 2022 and collaborates with All Aboard Washington and the Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates.

Punch your ticket

For more information on All Aboard Northwest, visit <https://allaboardnw.org/>.

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