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Depot to be upgraded in 2009

By Sandra Cason, News Messenger

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Spurred on by the good news of increased rail ridership, Marshall Depot Inc. officials announced recently that upgrades will be made to the local train station next year.

The big news, said Marshall Depot board president Hal Evans, is that work is under way on restoration of old Steam Engine 400, now relocated to Depot property from its resting place of many years in City Park.



Courtney Case/News Messenger (ENLARGE)

Hal Evans, President of the Marshall Depot board of directors, announces during a press conference that passenger travel on Amtrak's Texas Eagle increased here this fiscal year by 35.4 percent.

"We receive a lot of calls inquiring about that," Evans said at a Thursday press conference.

"We've been working with two railroad companies and we've started sandblasting." One company, he said, has agreed to do that job and all "metal work," while another has agreed to supply \$4,000 worth of paint and to handle painting.

"We'll supply all the extras, like the bell and whistle," Evans added.

And, he said, there will be a number of "enhancements" at the station itself, one of which will be a new passenger and luggage lift at the tunnel.

"When it was built in the 1940s, the tunnel was a godsend because travelers didn't have to walk over the tracks to get to the train, but the steps have made access difficult for the handicapped," Evans said.

The current lift has proved to be "a near total failure," he added, noting: "We're working with East Texas Council of Governments to get a new one."

While the new year bodes well for the Depot, Evans told the group gathered for the occasion that Amtrak's local activity is already realizing unprecedented success.

"We're here to share some good news with you that we got recently from our resident Amtrak person, Griff Hubbard," Evans said.

When compared to figures for the previous fiscal year, the Amtrak station at Marshall Depot showed a 35.4 percent increase in ridership for 2008, Evans said.

"There were 7,406 passengers boarding here for an average of 21 passengers a day," for the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1, 2007, and ending Sept. 30, 2008, he added.

Statistics for the Texas Eagle indicate a ridership increase of 15.2 percent this year over last, coupled with an 18.8 percent increase in revenue.

Also, Texas Eagle ranked first of all 15 Amtrak long distance trains in ridership and second among the 15 in terms of revenue.

November statistics show a 16.9 percent increase in ridership and an 18.4 percent increase in revenue for the Texas Eagle — "a long distance train that travels from Chicago to Los Angeles," according to a press release distributed at the meeting.

It not only serves towns such as Marshall, Longview, Texarkana and Mineola, but also five of the ten most populated cities in the United States, the release added.

"We work hard to keep Amtrak in Marshall," Evans said. "We supply quarters for their offices and for their train crew. It doesn't cost them a penny. Also, they have a crew change here and those people spend the night in Marshall. That helps with tourism."

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Joining Evans in addressing the group was Harrison County Judge Richard Anderson, who serves on the Depot board and is also chairman of the Governmental Relations Committee for the East Texas Corridor Council.

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Anderson said the increase in passenger rail numbers may be a sign of the times.

With volatile energy prices driven by costs ranging from \$40 to \$147 for a barrel of oil, the judge said that "it may be that it has started to take hold" in the minds of the American public that "these prices are manipulated."

There may be an "awakening" to the need for rail travel, he added.

"The important role that an enhanced passenger and freight rail system can play in our country, region and nation's transportation future cannot be overemphasized," Anderson said.

"This is of particular importance at this time when we, as a nation and region, must address issues such as a faltering economy, the need for jobs, the need to be good stewards of our environment and resources and the growing congestion on our highways."

Anderson said it is the vision of area leaders and the Corridor Council to have a passenger rail system — the tracks of which would be laid parallel to freight train tracks — that would whisk travelers to their destinations at speeds of 150 miles per hour.

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