

Saturday's Train Day event 'historic' for Marshall

By Steve Bandy, News Messenger

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In the spirit of the 139th anniversary of the joining together east and west of the Transcontinental Railroad at Promontory Summit, Utah, a historic signing ceremony at 11 a.m. Saturday at the Marshall Depot will bring together the East Texas and North-Central Texas Councils of Government with the Northwest Louisiana Council of Government.

A Memorandum of Understanding, designed to build interstate support for a strengthened passenger rail service in the Ark-La-Tex region, will be signed in ceremonies on the west lawn of the Depot. Authors of the MOU envision a future east-west connection between Marshall and Shreveport/Bossier City, La. and on to Meridian, Miss., — as well as a connection between Little Rock, Ark., and Memphis — thus creating a southern rail route to the Atlantic seaboard.

The event is being held in conjunction with Amtrak's celebration of National Train Day. Dignitaries from throughout Texas, Louisiana and Arkansas and from Amtrak are scheduled to be in attendance.

"In addition to the historic signing of the Memorandum of Understanding that will take place that day, National Train Day also will provide an excellent opportunity to establish Marshall in people's minds as the 'Rail Crossroads of the Ark-La-Tex,'" said Christina Anderson, local representative on the District IX board of directors for the National Association of Railroad Passengers.

"This crossroads concept is very important as we look to establishing a future connection east to Shreveport/Bossier and Meridian and, eventually, south to Palestine and Houston," Ms. Anderson said. "These connections will, of course, add to the already existing connection west to Dallas/Fort Worth and north to Little Rock and Chicago.

"The event is designed to help anchor the Interstate Highway 20 corridor concept plus highlight and encourage the cooperation between the states in our region."

Richard Anderson, Harrison County Judge, said the MOU will "reach across the borders of our neighboring states of Louisiana and Arkansas" to unite them with the existing MOU between the East Texas Council of Governments and the North-Central Texas Council of Governments signed in August in Mineola.

"We thought National Train Day would be an appropriate date for the ceremonial signing of the MOU since May 10 commemorates the 139th anniversary of the joining together of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads at Promontory Summit, Utah, uniting the transcontinental railroad and a continent," Judge Anderson said. "Since the MOU will help to bring together Louisiana and Texas with regard to rail, we feel that, like with the golden spike, we, too, in a sense, will be bringing together east and west."

The signing of the MOU Saturday is a direct result of the April 17 information and strategy meeting held at The Marshall when plans for a proposed high-speed rail system were unveiled.

In honor of this historic occasion, music will be provided by the official "Let's Take the Train from Marshall to Meridian via Shreveport/Bossier" Dixieland Band made up of musicians from Marshall, Shreveport/Bossier and Arkansas, according to Ms. Anderson.

There also will be a National Train Day cake and information for guests interested in joining the passenger rail movement.

Also during the day, there will be drawings for five Amtrak round-trip tickets for two for destinations along the Texas Eagle route. A drawing for each trip will take place every hour from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Those interested in entering the drawing can do so at the Saturday event or by visiting the Marshall Depot T&P Railway Museum gift shop.

National Train Day festivities in Marshall also will include the annual reunion of Texas & Pacific employees, honoring those who worked at the T&P facilities in Marshall and all along the rails between 1873 and 1971. That event will begin at 2 p.m.

"It should be a historic day, not only for our community, but also for our Ark-La-Tex region with regard to our taking steps to work collaboratively to strengthen the passenger and freight rail system here and beyond," Ms. Anderson said. "With so many issues facing our region and nation, such as the ever-increasing price of fuel, highway congestion, the need for economic growth and wise stewardship of our environment, and other important issues, we feel that a strengthened, effective passenger and freight rail system can be a vital piece of our regional and national transportation future.

"Working collaboratively as a region, we feel we can improve our prospects of obtaining federal and state funding for this effort."

Train Day

The national passenger railroad is using National Train Day to trumpet its recent success.

Amtrak's ridership and revenue have never been stronger. During fiscal year 2007, more than 25.8 million passengers traveled on Amtrak, an increase of 1.5 million over the previous year and a record for the most passengers ever since Amtrak began operation in 1971.

Total ticket revenue for fiscal 2007 was more than \$1.5 billion, an increase of 11 percent over the previous year. It was the fifth straight year of increases for Amtrak.

For the first quarter of fiscal 2008, more than 7 million passengers traveled on Amtrak, an increase of 11 percent, and revenue was up 14.6 percent to more than \$434 million.

Still, future growth likely depends on federal funding, which the Bush administration and others would like to drastically scale back. Amtrak and its allies say it is unrealistic to expect the company to ever be completely self-sufficient.

Amtrak's celebration of National Train Day actually began six weeks ago with special promotions, events, partnerships and an advertising campaign. On Saturday, Amtrak will host events at four of its largest stations — Washington, New York, Chicago and Los Angeles — where visitors may take part in a variety of activities including live musical performances, exhibits, trip planning, VIP appearances and trip giveaways.

The national effort on Saturday includes a performance by singer-songwriter Sara Bareilles in Washington's Union Station. Al Roker, of NBC's "Today" show, is serving as the official spokesman and will host those events.

Elsewhere, the Harlem Globetrotters will perform in New York City's Penn Station. Amtrak also is sponsoring events in Dallas and other groups are organizing smaller-scale festivities around the country.

Amtrak is spending \$2.2 million on train day, according to spokeswoman Karina Romero. The cost includes general Amtrak advertising that the company has tagged with the train day promotion.

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