

Portola Railroad Museum Master Facilities Plan

By Eugene Vicknair, Site Committee Chairman

Part 1.. Display House and Parking Lots

In 2000, the Feather River Rail Society Board of Directors adopted a concept master facilities plan for the Portola Railroad Museum developed by the FRRS Site Committee and shaped by meetings with members, discussions with public space professionals and years of observation and experience with the PRM site.

In an ongoing series of article, the details of the concept plan adopted are going to be presented and the thinking and reasons behind them explored. This will serve to inform the membership as to the improvements being planned for the site and give them a chance to comment.

The goals of this plan were many and often conflicting: take an authentic diesel service facility, never designed for public access, and make it easy and enjoyable to experience without destroying its authentic character and flavor. And, at the same time, find ways to present historic equipment in easy to reach locations and protect the most valuable and vulnerable within closed buildings.

This last part presented one of the largest hurdles to the committee. While the PRM encompasses about 40 acres, its shape is long and narrow, with much of it covered by existing trackage. To add difficulty, a large portion of the most open space, inside the balloon loop, is restricted from construction due to environmental wastes. This led the committee to explore many different options and seek input during member meetings to solve this problem.

While space does exist over the Repair In Place (RIP) tracks for a protective building (and one is incorporated in the plan), the tight spacing of these tracks makes it impractical for a true display space. One idea presented by members and adopted as part of the plan was to run a long display track around the current parking lot. Due to the radius of curve needed to tie into the mainline, the plan requires earth to be removed from the hill at the west end of the parking lot. This need in turn inspired a solution for the display building problem.

The committee recommended that more of the hill be removed and a portion of the west end of the parking lot be taken for the construction of a spacious display building, capable of holding 9-12 individual pieces of equipment on 3 tracks. Displayed here would be the rarer and more delicate items of rolling stock. The building's look would be an original design, perhaps taking its styling cues from either the DRGW/WP Salt Lake depot or the WP's Oakland depot. While this would remove some of the available parking area, it was found that the parking lot was used beyond approximately 40% capacity only 2 or 3 weekends out of the year. The building, a rerouting of the road to the picnic area and a proposed replica Western Pacific depot, would eliminate only about 25% of the current parking lot. By placing this display building along with a replica depot in this central area of the museum, a major entrance area would be created, presenting our most prized equipment in a clean, lighted

building where they are protected from the elements, and enough space would be available for visitors to actually see the equipment and be able to move freely among the cars and locomotives inside. The rerouting of the road into the west end of the museum would eliminate driving in an area where many visitors must walk to reach the diesel shop, creating a safer and more integrated environment. And the planned paving and striping of the remaining parking lot would create a more efficient use of the space than is seen currently.

A great deal of additional parking area was found just up the main entrance road. The museum's lease actually extends up the entrance road quite a ways. With the acquisition of the Western Pacific Hospital, a large amount of land was available to provide additional space for the museum's needs. Part of this was proposed by the committee to become a large parking area, associated with the WP Hospital and a future Visitor Center/Display Museum. This new parking area would provide over 100 additional spaces for the museum and possibly for city functions as well. This area has long been used as overflow parking on the infrequent days when the lower lot was crowded.

While visitors would need to walk from the upper lot, the distance is not great (about 1000 feet to reach the diesel shop) and a simple shuttle car could provide assistance to those needing it. It has also been suggested that a loading platform could be built along the Old Town Portola extension to allow cabooses train loading. More spaces in the lower lot could be dedicated to accessible spaces and volunteer parking if it was decided this was desirable. Concepts for two smaller parking lots, completely dedicated to volunteers, are also being explored. One would be located near the sleeper and shower cars and have a paved walkway to the volunteer accommodations and one would be at the Hospital if that building is developed.

Of course, as work progresses, plans become more detailed and more discussions are held with the Union Pacific and the City of Portola concerning issues raised by these improvements, changes will occur. But the ultimate goal will remain to provide an authentic and enjoyable experience for the volunteer and the visitor while serving our mission of protecting, presenting and preserving the history of the Western Pacific and its people.

Bob Haynes

We were saddened to learn of the death of Bob Haynes. Bob was a charter member of our organization and became a life member when that option became available. He was a resident of Reno, Nevada and will be missed.