

PRM Master Facilities Plan

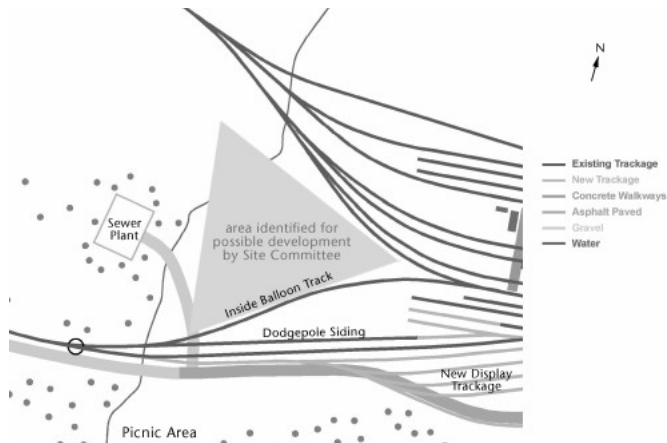
By Eugene Vicknair, Site Committee Chairman
 Part 2, Replica Roundhouse

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 articles, 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.

In Part 1, the problem of finding covered, protected space to display equipment in was discussed, along with a solution recommended by the Site Committee and adopted by the FRRS: a purpose-built display building west of the current parking lot. Another solution recommended by the committee and adopted by the Society entails constructing a building that will become a display in and of itself: an exact replica of a Western Pacific roundhouse.

While much of the area inside the balloon track is off-limits to heavy development, there is a triangular shaped area between the sewer plant, the main balloon track and the inside balloon track that presented the committee with some intriguing possibilities. While this location has a variety of difficult issues concerning its use (including the fact that it is lower than the main trackage and contains an oil separator that must remain unobstructed), this prime piece of museum real estate was too interesting and potentially useful to be left unexplored.



The Site Committee looked at several ideas and heard many suggestions concerning this area. While many answered several goals of the facility plan, including providing better visitor amenities and creating more visitor interest over a larger area of the facility, none seemed suited to what could be a centerpiece location for the museum, on par with the diesel shop itself.

Finally, a survey of the site indicated that it was large enough to support a substantial structure of some kind. At that point, the creation of a replica roundhouse, an old “pipe dream”

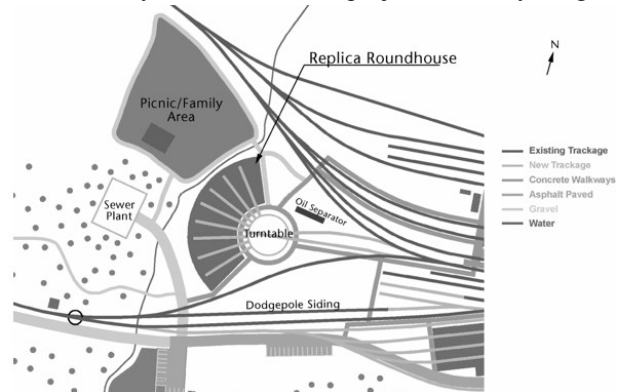
from the early days of the museum, was revived.

This idea fit perfectly into the goals of the committee, as it created a focal point for the museum’s west end, provided more space for the display and protection of equipment and created an opportunity for educating the public about a once vital and now vanished item of railroad infrastructure. Measurement of the site revealed that it would just fit a replica of the most common plan of WP roundhouse, an 8-stall style used at several locations around the system.

That this building would be recommended to be an exact replica of a WP structure (Winnemucca’s roundhouse was used as the model), and not just a “generic” roundhouse, presented its own challenges. First and foremost would be the acquisition of an appropriate turntable and the creation of a turntable pit. Turntables are not exactly items one finds lying around.

However, luck has been with the FRRS and a real Western Pacific turntable has been located in Virginia City, Nevada. This turntable is a 110’ model (identical to the turntable once located in Portola and 10’ shorter than Winnemucca’s) that was used in Oroville. It had been removed many years ago and sold to the Virginia and Truckee tourist line. Recently, the V&T sought a small diesel to supplement their steam locomotive and approached the FRRS about acquiring our remaining ex-U. S. Army 80 ton locomotive. A trade was arranged and the non-running 80 tonner was traded for the Oroville turntable.

Obviously, the roundhouse project is a very long-term



plan. However, with a real turntable now in the care of the FRRS, it realistically within our reach. Current thinking is that a turntable pit would be constructed first, and then the area back-filled to bring it to the level of the surrounding trackage, drastically simplifying the task of creating an operational turntable.

When completed, the Roundhouse, along with the Diesel Shop, will provide a unique glimpse of Portola in two eras, and present a recreated railroad experience that few museums will be able to match.

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.