

The Mercury (<http://www.pottsmmerc.com>)
Volunteers key to Colebrookdale Railroad project

By Evan Brandt, *The Mercury*
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POTTSTOWN — You might think that after a week working for a Montgomery County maintenance crew, the last thing Ken Shellenberger would want to do is be pouring cement and bending metal on the rails during his weekend hours.

But that's just what he does.

And he loves it.

Shellenberger is one of a group of volunteers who work on repairing and maintaining the ties and rails that make the Colebrookdale Railroad a railroad.

"You know, you'd think it would be hard to get people to come out and really work up a sweat, putting in eight to 12 hours on a

Saturday, but we keep coming back," he said with a laugh.

During a recent Saturday stint, he was joined by Ken McIlvee, a retired cemetery worker who is a self-described "train buff," and Michael Martin, who works for QVC and wanted something to do outside where he could get his hands dirty.

They were pouring cement as part of the effort to convert the old Davis Brothers Scrapyard at the end of Old Glasgow Street, into the new maintenance shed for the Colebrookdale Railroad — a scenic nine-mile stretch of Civil War era track that is being developed as an historic excursion railroad called the Secret Valley Line.

The project got some good news this week when the U.S. Housing and Urban Development department announced a \$1.47 million loan guarantee to help finance the project.

In addition to grants and loans, there is also significant fund-raising going on to pay for the project.

On Sept. 26, the railroad will join forces with the historic State Theater in Boyertown for a [historic "Evening of Entertainment"](#) with live period music from the Roaring 20s and Jazz Age; a special short film from the turn of the century and a live auction and fundraising raffle. Doors open at 7 p.m. and 200 advance tickets are available for \$18. Tickets are \$25 at the door.

Fundraising also is now being planned to raise the money to match a hoped for grant to establish an historic station in Memorial Park for the Pottstown end of the line.

To be certain, the project won't happen without money.

But the project also wouldn't happen as fast as it has without the help of a dedicate corps of volunteers said Michele D. Barrett, office manager for [the Colebrookdale Railroad Historic Preservation Trust](#), which is spearheading the project.

"This railroad project is only possible through their efforts. The value of their labor has matched — many times over — the funds required by the projects' start-up," Barrett said.

All volunteers should be recognized for the impact they have, she said.

"Too many people believe that volunteering is something nice that some people do to make themselves feel good about helping others. But our communities rely on volunteers for critical services and to meet needs of the individuals in our neighborhoods," said Barrett.

Pointing to volunteer firefighters, Sunday school teachers, Meals on Wheels volunteers, to name just a few, she said "it is often hard to quantify their impact."

Barrett nevertheless estimated that "to date, and without a formal audit of our volunteer-tracking records, we estimate that our volunteers have donated at least 10,000 hours to the restoration of the historic Colebrookdale Railroad preservation."

McIlvee, 61, who admits to being one of those people who loves everything about trains, said he puts in about five or six hours a weekend on the tracks.

“My grandfather worked for the Pennsy” (that’s “Pennsylvania Railroad” for those of you who don’t speak train) “and I grew up chasing trains,” he said with a chuckle.

Up until now though, his only experience on a railroad “was with model trains.”

So he jumped at a chance to work on the real thing.

Working on the real rails with a crew of volunteers who are all there, not to collect a paycheck, but because they want to be, “has really been a great bonding experience for me,” McIlvee said.

Others work in the Boyertown rail yard, restoring the first two of the eight historic passenger cars, both outside and in, [which arrived in July](#).

The “open car” and cabooses have already been restored and progress on the passenger cars is significant.

“The impact of the Colebrookdale Railroad volunteers who are willing to donate their time and their skills is tremendous — but it won’t be long until the region realizes the financial growth now being planted by their efforts,” said Barrett.

“Their time allows an otherwise unfunded stream of work to continue to bring back to this region an economic catalyst that holds the possibility of drawing 20,000 to 30,000 visitors annually” who are estimated to provide \$1.8 million in economic impact.

If the work continues and the infrastructure and equipment is enhanced, that impact could balloon to \$18.2 million, she pointed out, along with the 270 jobs created during implementation and the 80 jobs that will remain once the tourist railroad is up and running.

“The operations they are building will create jobs and thousands of dollars of economic benefits to this region,” Barrett said of all the railroad’s volunteers. “Still, we do very much hope that they feel good about this important work.”

Martin does.

He said he enjoys using skills useful in 1900, rather than the computer skills he uses at his job in the 21st century.

(Of course specialized skills are not necessary. [A recent post on the railroad’s Facebook page](#) asked simply “Can You Scrape Paint? Then we need you today!”)

Riding the odd yellow vehicle built to ride the rails, and which the crew has nicknamed “Sponge Bob,” Martin said some of the hardest work is repairing the sidings and switches.

Much of that remains if their efforts to install a switch and run track right into the old Davis scrapyard building is to come to fruition.

“We always looking for more volunteers,” Shellenberger said with a smile.

To volunteer for track work, contact Rich Tobin, rtobin9486@comcast.net, 484-949-0285; or Roger Lehmann, roger@colebrookdalerailroad.com, 610-960-6104.

To volunteer for passenger car work, contact Steve Hladio, shladio49@aol.com, 610-207-0370.

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