

All aboard! \$200K grant bolsters plan for Boyertown-to-Pottstown rail service



As happy train enthusiasts wave, snap photos and covered their ears as the Colebrookdale Railroad train pulled into the Boyertown train yard Wednesday afternoon after taking state legislators, area officials from Montgomery and Berks Counties on a ride. The future looks bright for the Colebrookdale Railroad Preservation Trust after receiving a \$200,000 grant to build a train station in the downtown Boyertown rail yard which will be a part of the nine-mile-long Severt Valley tourist excursion line. Photo by John Strickler/The Mercury

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1 COMMENT



The future looks bright for the Colebrookdale Railroad Preservation Trust as executive director Nathaniel Guest talks about receiving a \$200,000 grant to build a train station in the downtown Boyertown rail yard which will be a part of the 9-mile-long Secret Valley tourist excursion line. Photo by John Strickler/The Mercury

BOYERTOWN — Progress on the revitalization of the Colebrookdale Railroad these days means more than pulling refurbished passenger cars along the picturesque 9-mile track on the shores of Manatawny Creek.

These days progress is being measured in cars and engines acquired, being fixed up and put into service.

And Wednesday marked another milestone on the railroad's journey to full service when Executive Director Nathaniel Guest announced last week's awarding of a \$200,000 grant to begin construction of "railroad station infrastructure right here in Boyertown."

The announcement came after the train — pulling cars packed with more than 70 federal and state legislators, county commissioners and municipal officials of all stripes — arrived at the downtown yard to the applause of a crowd that had gathered to welcome it.

"By this time next year, there will be a brick platform, a boarding shelter and paving," Guest said. "It's the first stage of our station development."

News of a station and platform at the Boyertown end of the line mirrors plans for the Pottstown end, where [a historic 1887 depot is to be erected in Pottstown's Memorial Park](#), the other stop on the line.

The stations will serve a tourist excursion line called "The Secret Valley Line," that will feature historically accurate cars and special seasonal rides along the line that was built during the Civil War and is expected to attract 20,000 to 30,000 visitors annually.

"I promise you that within three years, if not sooner, we will have beautiful stations here in Boyertown and in Pottstown that will be the center of the community, and will bring people from outside our community here," said Guest.

Those along for the ride Wednesday share that vision.

"I think this is going to mean a lot for Pottstown," said Pottstown Borough Manager Mark Flanders shortly after climbing down from his ride.

"I think the economic potential is exponential when you look at other tourist rail services like this across the country. It's going to be a draw for both Pottstown and Boyertown, a win for both Montgomery and Berks County," Flanders said.

"It was a wonderful opportunity and I was so glad to be on the inaugural trip," said Elwood Taylor, chairman of the Upper Pottsgrove Board of Commissioners.

“It’s a great opportunity for the whole area,” said Taylor. “It’s going to bring a lot of people to visit us and lots of business for people doing business in the Pottsgroves.”

“The enthusiasm is catching,” said Montgomery County Commissioner Bruce L. Castor Jr.

“This project really highlights not only how Pottstown is on the move and Boyertown is on the move, but also the importance of intergovernmental cooperation,” Castor said. “Things like this take vision, they take energy and they take enthusiasm and this project has all that.”

Berks County Commissioners Mark Scott and Christian Leinbach both made note of the fact that much of the energy, vision and enthusiasm for this project comes from Guest himself.

Leinbach noted that although the Berks County Commissioners saved the line from being de-commissioned, “the whole idea of returning the line for freight didn’t work until Nathaniel came along.”

“The feats just keep coming,” said Scott. “Every once in a while you get a project that moves forward and runs on the energy and skills of one extraordinary person.”

Scott, who has long championed the economic benefits for Boyertown of keeping the line open for freight — something the railroad has [successfully attracted since the beginning of the year](#) — he also pointed to the “spill-over economic impact” of the tourist train.

Flanders agreed, pointing to the critical mass of things to do in the same central area of Pottstown, and how that makes it easier for visitors to spend the entire day in town.

“When you consider where the train is going to terminate in Pottstown, you have Memorial Park, you have the splash park, you have the dog park, you have miniature golf, you have Pottsgrove Manor, hopefully soon you have the carousel, and the Schuylkill River Trail, the heritage area’s interpretive center and Riverfront Park, that whole area is just growing by leaps and bounds,” Flanders said.

Also growing is the speed with which the railroad is accumulating equipment and momentum.

Just last week, [two passenger cars were delivered to Pottstown and inspected](#) before being taken up the track to Boyertown for refurbishment.

The passenger coaches, which date back to 1919, were built for the Adirondack Railway. The cars, No. 5033 and No. 4970, were moved by rail from Saratoga, N.Y., and one of them was put into service for Wednesday’s special “legislative open house.”

And just before that, the railroad received delivery of [a little, yellow industrial locomotive](#) — built in 1964 by the Plymouth Locomotive Works of Plymouth, Ohio — used for a variety of purposes, including moving rail cars around the yard.

In March, [the railroad announced the receipt of a \\$1.4 million grant from PennDOT](#) to upgrade the railroad’s lines, equipment and infrastructure.

And at the end of last year, the railroad announced [the donation of the historic red caboose](#) which marks the tail end of each journey.

“We’ve made remarkable progress in just the last six months, with getting the caboose, the locomotive fixed up, two new passenger cars with three more on the way,” Guest said.

“Make no mistake, we have a long row to hoe to get to that point,” Guest said Wednesday.

“There’s a lot of fundraising that needs to happen, there’s a lot of hard work that needs to be done on our passenger cars, but we have the commitment and we have the talent,” he said.

They also have the support.

In addition to the grant announcement, Guest said “as of last week, raised over \$100,000 in cash donations and, when you consider all the in-kind donations we’ve received, we’ve really raised more than \$200,000 from the community.”

That money will come back 10-fold, according to a study of the railroad’s economic potential.

The study estimates an annual impact of \$980,000 from railroad spending; \$1.8 million annual economic impact from visitors and \$7.2 million economic impact of capital cost investment during implementation.

It also anticipates 270 new jobs through the implementation phases of the project and 80 new, sustained jobs thereafter.

The railroad is operated by the [Colebrookdale Railroad Preservation Trust](#), a non-profit, tax-exempt organization. Donations are tax deductible and memberships are also available.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Evan Brandt has worked for The Mercury since November 1997. His beat includes Pottstown, the surrounding townships and the Pottstown and Pottsgrove school districts, as well as other varied general topics like politics, the environment and education. Reach the author atebrandt@pottsmmerc.com or follow Evan on Twitter: [@PottstownNews](#).

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