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REVIVING RAIL: Tourist train proposed for Colebrookdale Spur

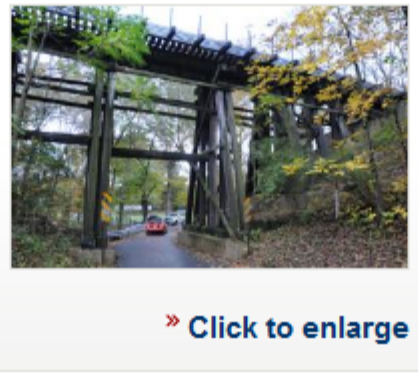

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By Evan Brandt
ebrandt@pottsmc.com

POTTSTOWN — It was just four months after the "golden spike" that linked the east and west coasts by rail was driven into the ground that the Colebrookdale Railroad began operations.

These days, the once-active line is barely used more than once a month, and there have been attempts to abandon it for everything from a bike trail to a feeder road.

But Nathaniel Guest has other ideas — and he's not alone.



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Guest, a 1994 Pottsgrove High School graduate, thinks the Colebrookdale is an excellent candidate to become a tourist attraction in much the same way tourist railroads in Strasburg and New Hope operate.

It was Guest who wrote the historical analysis of the line's importance when the federal government was considering a request to abandon the line.

Although Guest's expertise also includes a Cornell University degree in historic preservation and a Temple Law degree, it is not his education but his obvious enthusiasm for trains that is driving his pursuit of this project.

"I think a lot of people under-appreciate the resources we have in this area and this is one of them," Guest told the roughly 30 people who gathered in the Carousel at Pottstown building Wednesday night to hear his presentation.

Part of that presentation was a look at three other tourist railroads which operate in southeastern Pennsylvania: the world-famous Strasburg Railroad in Lancaster County, the New Hope and Ivyland Railroad in Bucks County, and the Wanamaker, Kempton & Southern Railroad in Lehigh and Berks counties.

Two of them operate all year-round and all offer amenities, such as historic passenger cars, dining and some even offer liquor service.

The Strasburg has roughly 375,000 riders annually; the New Hope line carries 80,000 annually and the Wanamaker roughly 15,000 annually. **Continued...**

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Startling small, running weekends and in conjunction with special events, Guest believes the Colebrookdale line could attract as many as 10,000 riders in its first year.

The nine-mile ride along the Colebrookdale — which Guest said could be re-named The Hidden Valley Railroad "because of all the hidden valleys and vistas" — takes about one hour.

Riders could depart and frequent shops or restaurants in Pottstown or Boyertown before returning, he said.

"We could really have an important attraction and reach a critical mass where people come from all over to Southeast Pennsylvania to ride these trains, said Guest. "Then it becomes a sustainable attraction for the community and has a positive impact. It's not just a series of excursions."

He found a lot of agreement from those in attendance Wednesday.

Paul Nichini, the president and CEO of the New Hope and Ivyland Railroad was there and said he had ridden the line and noted "I think it's one of the most scenic I've seen, certainly in southeast Pennsylvania."

He noted that his line "has seen its business grow in the last 20 years, despite the economy."

Ross Rowland is also no stranger to tourist railroads.

He has helped establish several: founder of the Freedom Train, a mobile museum which toured the country in 1976; and is currently in charge of an effort to refurbish passenger cars for the Greenbrier Express, a period train between Washington, D.C., and the Greenbrier resort in West Virginia.

"It's incredibly scenic," Rowland said of the Colebrookdale line. "It's hard to imagine sitting in downtown Pottstown how pretty the ride is." **Continued...**

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"And my gut is, if Nathaniel is able to garner the support of the communities on both ends of this line, that it can be a very successful operation," Rowland said.

It didn't take long to find support from both ends.

"This is definitely an exciting possibility for us," Pottstown Borough Manager Jason Bobst told the group.

He noted that Pottstown has several events, such as the Volleyball Rumble and national BMX tournaments, in town which attract thousands of people.

"I think we can start off growing this on an event-based basis, also themed rides, like for Christmas, Halloween and with Sly Fox Brewery coming to Pottstown, we can do beer tasting or wine-tasting events in conjunction with the train," Bobst said.

He said he envisions the Pottstown siding being in Memorial Park.

Adrienne Blank, main street manager for Building a Better Boyertown, was also on board with the idea.

"It's the most beautiful ride I've ever taken and it's just the right length and my 8-year-old daughter could take it and not go nuts," she said.

"I believe there is grant money to prepare the area where the train enters Boyertown and I have faith in this vision for both Pottstown and Boyertown," Blank told the group.

George Wausnock, president of the Carousel at Pottstown organization, which hosted the meeting amidst its reconstruction of a Victorian-era all-wood carousel, also expressed enthusiasm.

Continued...

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He said the train, combined with the carousel and the mini-golf course the borough plans to build next door as soon as the High Street bridge of the Manatwamy is completed, will help make Pottstown a destination, especially for those using the Schuylkill River Trail.

Support was also pledged in a more regional basis.

Carol DeWolf, who heads up the Schuylkill Highlands Conservation Landscape Initiative, spoke about how such a project fits with the economic development study her organization recently completed, looking at the area along the Schuylkill River from Valley Forge to Reading.

Already the area boasts "the highest number of culturally significant resources anywhere," adding that the plan calls for supporting sustainable, eco-friendly tourism and development "at the gateways and river towns."

"This is in the iron and steel heritage area," DeWolf said. "We have history nobody else has."

Outdoor recreation, tour providers and other hospitality businesses will help the economic base without debasing the natural, historic and cultural resources on which they depend, DeWolf said.

"This area can be a real three-day destination that is not a Candyland or Disney, but true towns with authentic history that will enhance tourism," DeWolf said. "There is a lot of opportunity for new business here that people don't really know."

There are also opportunities to obtain the right equipment to get the idea on the right track, said Guest.

According to his presentation, "a newly restored steam locomotive is available for lease and passenger cars will need to be restored and boarding infrastructure constructed."

The project is plausible, Guest said, with sufficient determination and resources.

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Recently, the \$55 million Virginia and Truckee Railroad was established with \$10 million in federal funding and \$1 million in state funding.

It generated 76 permanent jobs, 750 construction jobs and another 118 jobs from support attractions, he found.

"The next stage, is identifying unanswered questions and forming a nonprofit entity to proceed with this project," said Guest.

He can be reached via e-mail at ncg1@cornell.edu

You can follow Evan Brandt on Twitter @PottstownNews

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NEWS fydriving.com

barnabas wrote on Oct 15, 2011 10:37 PM:

"I think Mr Guest has something here. Why not use existing infrastructure, like a 9-mile rail line, and give it a new purpose? Our communities need to look ahead and embrace new ideas. Manufacturing will not be what drives our local economy."

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jean valjean wrote on Oct 16, 2011 7:07 AM:

"I've taken younger family members to Strasburg 100+ visits, and they love it. While that's steam engines, an attraction by themselves, the ride is pleasant, and never lacking for passengers. Strasburg runs 2 concurrent trains on many weekends, and weekdays during the summer. This could easily be a success."

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DaisyBGreen wrote on Oct 16, 2011 8:40 AM:

"You are right on barnabas and I am simply thrilled at this idea. Trains are such an integral, fascinating part of our history that still, today, play a vital role in moving our nation. The fascination factor is never diminished from generation to generation.

I have nurtured the thought of having a train museum in Pottstown, somewhere near the river, constructed of old train cars, some with overnight accommodations, run like a bed and breakfast.

"You can live your dreams if you can embrace change. It's by taking chances that you'll learn how to be brave." - Nikita Koloff"

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resident1 wrote on Oct 16, 2011 8:50 AM:

"Brilliant!"

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zeta 24 wrote on Oct 16, 2011 9:46 AM:

"I am astonished that a proposal to invest heavily in a coal fired boiler would garner such a wide circle of support from environmental advocates. Perhaps some of this readily available grant money and federal and state funds could be used to insure that the pipes of Reading that have put 10's of millions of gallons of raw sewage into the river recently be replaced as the consent order mandated. 4 years is a very long time not to comply with requirements to insure public safety."

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oldninthway wrote on Oct 16, 2011 12:01 PM:

"I believe Mr Guest's idea might be just the answer that Pottstown has been searching for..."

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