

THE BLADE

One of America's Great Newspapers

Published: 11/16/2013

Rail buffs in their element

Fostoria trumpets new train park

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FOSTORIA — This was one ribbon-cutting where locomotive horns disrupting the speeches was no problem at all.

Audience members simply turned around and started shooting pictures or video of the trains.

The occasion was the dedication of Fostoria's new Iron Triangle Visitor Center and Viewing Area, a train-watching park built this year on the former site of a long-closed — and dilapidated — pork-packing plant.

“It's amazing, when Fostorians get together and try to influence what can happen, to see what can be done,” David Whitta, vice president of Whitta Construction Inc., told a gathering of about 100 on the park's grounds Friday afternoon.

Mr. Whitta's Fostoria company received the \$1.1 million contract, funded mainly with a state grant, to build the park, which features a covered shelter with benches and restrooms, lighting, paved parking and, once the grass seeds grow and take hold, large lawns.

The ceremony attracted people from as far away as Goshen, Ind., from which Ron Breniser traveled to watch the ribbon-cutting and planned to stay at least through today to watch trains.

“I always enjoy coming here. I come three to five times a year on weekends,” Mr. Breniser said.

Without the park, “there was really no [single] place where you could catch all the stuff going on,” said Ray Zeber of Wellington, Ohio, who also visits Fostoria frequently when he is not working as a Great Lakes mariner.

CSX Transportation obliged the crowd by sending one train after another past the park during the ceremony — including a Toledo-Columbus freight that rolled by at full speed, its horn blaring, just as Jim Roberts, president of the Fostoria Rail Preservation Society, snipped the ribbon held by Mr. Whitta and Fostoria Mayor Eric Keckler.

“We’re going to enjoy the sounds of all the trains as they come by — celebrate them today,” said the mayor, who called the park “another tool for us to use” to market Fostoria.

Mr. Roberts, a Tiffin city councilman and former Seneca County sheriff, credited a core group of six to seven people with maintaining pressure to do something positive with Fostoria’s reputation for heavy train traffic and make use of the run-down property near the tracks.

“This is going to be a bright spot for the city of Fostoria, not a blight,” he said.

Current city ordinance sets sunrise to sunset as the operating hours for all city parks. Mayor Keckler said he will propose to city council next week that longer hours be allowed for Iron Triangle, and that in any case people would be allowed there around the clock this weekend.

Railroad buffs have long gathered in Fostoria, renowned for the more than 100 trains that use one or more of the three major rail lines that intersect on the city’s south side, without any dedicated observation venue.

Many parked either at the old train station off South Main Street or on a lot next to the old pork plant, which for years also was home to a decaying cabin cruiser, parked on a trailer, named “Erie-sistible.”

City officials and the preservation society hope the park will be attractive not just to dedicated hobbyists, but also to more casual train-watchers who will bring their families and make a day of it.

“This is the best thing that’s happened to the rail fan society,” said Eddie Durnwald, a retired railroad worker from Fostoria. “It’s going to bring a lot of people here. Rail fans have been waiting a long time for this, and it’s important for the city.”

“It’s going to be a really neat place for people to go and enjoy the trains, enjoy time with their families, and just enjoy being here,” said Mr. Breniser, the Indiana visitor. “It’s going to do good things for the town as well.”

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Read more at <http://www.toledoblade.com/local/2013/11/16/Rail-buffs-in-their-element.html#mV70MIS5g0kLWa4s.99>