

FEATURES

Historic Train Depot Breathing New Life Into One Small Town

by Jill FitzSimmons

Nestled in a valley between Mount Rainier and Mount St. Helens is the small western Washington town of Morton (population 1,000). Annually, thousands of tourists speed past Morton on their way to national attractions. The town may be found at the junction of State Route 7 and the scenic byway U.S. Highway 12. The region offers fishing, hiking, and skiing at nearby White Pass. It's at this gateway to the South Cascade Mountains that Morton sits.

Still, town leaders haven't been able to find a way to pull tourists off the roads and into their timber town. Mayor Bob Worsham, who doubles as the town's historical-society president, quips that he'd like to put a gate across the highway, forcing visitors' attention to the charming town that's been his home for seven years.

Worsham just may have found his attention-getter. This past year, the Cowlitz River Valley Historical Society led an effort to move a nearly 100-year-old train depot from its original site to a more tourist-friendly location along the tracks but closer to the town's hub. The Morton Train Depot is the only remaining original structure on the former line of the Tacoma Eastern Railroad Company.

Today, some city leaders are hoping the depot will become an anchor for redevelopment in a town hit hard by the fading of the timber industry. Plans are

to rehabilitate the building, not only for the purpose of developing Morton's tourism industry but also to restore the structure to a functioning train station.

The depot could indeed provide many redevelopment opportunities, says George Sharp, marketing manager for the Washington State Department of Community, Trade, and Economic Development (CTED). The key to grabbing tourists, Sharp says, is to create an experience that will make visitors want to stay in your community for more than an hour. Day visitors spend about \$100 in a community, while overnight visitors spend about \$200.

"All of our smaller communities are looking for a unique selling position," says Sharp, who's worked closely with Worsham on this project. The depot could be Morton's selling position and a vehicle for redevelopment, he adds: Storeowners may jump on board and clean up their buildings. New businesses may open to capitalize on tourism. What could be generated is another tourist destination for Washington, Sharp maintains.

But pulling off such a big project in a town of little more than 1,000 people is no easy feat. Morton has no full-time economic development office. And the project has faced its share of hurdles. Originally, some community leaders opposed the project. Then, the land chosen for the relocation was found to be contaminated.

And don't forget the lack of funding for economic development in small towns like Morton. "It takes a huge amount of energy for these small communities to do something like this," says John Means, who was hired as project manager in 2004. "I can say this is really an extraordinary project for a city the size of Morton."

It was the historical society, a group primarily made up of senior citizens, that pushed this project forward, according to Means. The older generation recognizes the project's value to Morton and its

future generations. "I've never seen a group that's as dedicated. They just have a long-term perspective on this," Means says. "On the one hand, they're short on resources and sophistication [about such projects]. On the other hand, they're persistent."

RAILROAD-TIE CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

Morton, still home to many descendants of its pioneers, grew out of the logging industry. When the Tacoma Eastern Railway extended into Morton, the town was opened up to the rest of Lewis County, where the railway had prompted growth in logging companies, sawmills, and shingle mills. At one time, 100 sawmills operated in the area.

Tacoma Eastern Railroad, however, wasn't only hauling logs. In 1905, its passenger-excursion service, the Train to the Mountain, brought thousands of tourists from around the world to see the newly established Mount Rainier National Park, says Russell Holter, project compliance reviewer for the Washington Department of Archeology and Historic Preservation and coauthor of *Rails to Paradise*, a comprehensive history of the Tacoma Eastern Railroad. Passenger service from Morton continued until 1929, while the mail was delivered by train into the 1930s, Holter says.

The railroad played a big role in Morton's crowning as the railroad-tie capital of the world. Railroad ties made in Morton were shipped throughout the nation. During and after World War II, the ties were shipped overseas to Germany, Poland, China, and other countries hit hard by bombing.

Originally built just north of town in front of the Tubafur Mill, the depot remained at this location for 95 years. The balloon-framed, stick-built structure was one of about seven depots built along the Tacoma Eastern Railroad; today, it is the last on the line. The two-story building stands 32 feet high and is 52 feet long by 24 feet wide. The building looks today much as it would have looked 90 years ago.

When Tacoma Rail developed a new loading facility for the nearby mill in the 1980s, the depot found itself in the middle of the expansion plans. Weyerhaeuser sold the depot 20 years ago to the town's historical society for \$10, with the stipulation that the organization move it. But that didn't happen. Over the years, the historical society secured three grants to move the building, but in 2004, the grants were in danger of expiring. Someone needed to step up and get the project moving.

A NEW HOME FOR THE DEPOT

That moving force would prove to be the Worshams. Bob Worsham, fulfilling his many roles in the community, and his wife, Eleanor, who is a historical-society member, pulled together the chamber of commerce, the historical society and the city, securing one of the early grants to get the depot moved. He says he did it because he saw an opportunity for the community to prosper. With more activity at the depot could come more jobs.

Though John Means was hired in 2004 to help the historical society move the depot, still, getting the building ready for the October 15, 2005, move was an obstacle in itself. Using the Environmental Protection Agency's brownfields model for environmental cleanup and redevelopment, Means pulled together a team of technical people with expertise in historic preservation, environmental cleanup, and community and economic development to work on the various aspects of the depot move and cleanup project.

The historical society secured more than \$235,000 in state and federal grants and local contributions to relocate the historic depot. It took 14 permits—environmental, national historic preservation, and building—to negotiate the move, Means says. More than 13 government agencies are involved at some level, he adds.

Before the moving of the building, the task of lead abatement had to be done on the depot so it wouldn't be dropping lead paint chips along its route. Money was saved by contracting with the state department of corrections, which conducts a hazardous-waste training program for inmates. Inmates removed the lead paint and applied a primer to the building.

The building would be transported to the site of the former Chevron/Texaco bulk-fuel facility. Because contamination was found in the soil and groundwater, Chevron was ordered by the state's department of ecology to clean up the site. To prepare for the move, Chevron excavated what would be the depot's new foundation, pulling out 1,000 cubic feet of soil and backfilling with clean soil.

The building, of course, also had to be raised from its old foundation before it was moved. Under it were placed 70-foot-long steel beams. After being lifted onto the beams and stabilized, the depot was put on three dollies, each the size of a Mini Cooper car, Means says. The dollies could be steered individually to maneuver the depot. All was hooked onto a semitrailer and towed along the route by the moving contractor. Though the depot traveled only 1,500 feet, preparing the route took an incredible amount of planning. Trees had to be trimmed, and power, phone, cable, and fiber-optic lines lifted up and over the depot as it passed. The lines were 40 feet tall when jacked up.

The move turned into a community event. People lined the streets, cheering and applauding as the depot was moved toward its new home. The Mount Rainier Scenic Railroad joined in the celebration, offering free rides to spectators. Adding to the excitement was a film crew from the History Channel, who filmed the site preparation and the move for a new series called "Mega Movers."

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The Morton Train depot, once a forgotten icon of days gone by, could play a major role in the town's growth. Project supporters have big plans and dreams. Mayor Bob Worsham talks of a plaza being built around the depot, with gift shops, antique stores, and other tourist-friendly businesses. He'd like to see streetlights, restrooms, a loading dock, benches, and sidewalks.

Bob Worsham anticipates trains holding as many as 400 or 500 people stopping at the depot. Vehicles, maybe even carriages, will be needed to take visitors around town. Parking will be needed. He sees a modern, interactive museum at the depot that relives the history of Morton and the logging and railroad industries that played such an important role in its creation. He'd even like to see a sign out front, made from railroad ties.

While the town is a highly attractive place, it needs something to provide the motivation to pull it out of its economic downturn, Means says. Morton is on the cusp of moving forward, and the depot can provide that momentum, he believes. When community members see that an initiative of this scope can be accomplished in Morton, they'll be ready to tackle the next program: "I think so many things can build off of this project and grow from this project," Means says.

At the time this article was written, the depot was elevated about five feet in the air. A foundation is to be constructed under it, and the building lowered onto it. The next phase of the project will be exterior rehabilitation. Though the building is in good shape, much work needs to be done to restore it to its glory days. The state of Washington's U.S. Congressman Brian Baird has secured \$191,000 to repair windows, paint the depot, and rebuild a passenger platform.

Project officials recognize that the depot is unique, a physical record of a time gone by. Plans are to preserve the building as closely and well as possible because it is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Site-wide cleanup of the contamination also must be completed. While the groundwater aspect of the cleanup work is still in the remedial phase, the soil cleanup is scheduled for this summer, says Guy Barrett, site manager for the Washington Department of Ecology.

Once the site cleanup has been done, the project will be a strong contender for a Washington State Department of Transportation Enhancement Program grant, Means says. About \$287,000 would be used for sidewalks, curbing, parking, lampposts, signage, landscaping, and benches. The next phase would be interior rehabilitation. The depot needs new electrical heating and ventilation, as well as refurbishing. The historical society is petitioning the state legislature this year for \$200,000 in supplemental budget funding. "I would say that by the end of 2007 we should have this project wrapped up," Means estimates.

For now, the Morton Train Depot is ready to come alive again. The depot is a symbol of the town's past, as well as of its future. According to John Means, "Morton really needs to get some kind of spark going, and I think this is a core project to get that moving."

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