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'Ghost Train' Tour Satisfies Riders, Surprises Other Officials



'GHOST TRAIN' ARRIVES IN FITCHBURG

By DOUG FLETCHER
and JIM QUIRK

The time schedule said the train would stop in Fitchburg at 10:30 a.m. But the man on the end of the telephone said the tour started late so the train would be an hour late. In fact, the schedule was changed so the train was due at Depot Square about 11:50 a.m.

At 12:10 p.m. the passenger car special rolled to a stop. There were plenty of conductors on board, probably six or seven for the five cars. But none of the conductors looked at their fabled, accurate, pocket watches. They already knew they were late.

But who cared? The train was like a ghost train.

Few even knew it was coming, outside of a handful of Gardner city officials and manufacturers. Fitchburg's mayor didn't know about it. Neither did the city planner, a fellow who's intensely interested in various modes of transportation.

William T. Murray, executive

director of the Chamber of Commerce said he learned of the train trip Sunday, but he wasn't invited along for the ride.

Leominster Chamber of Commerce director Clarence J. Daniels didn't really know about the train either, but he said something about the Chamber's railway consultants taking care of information on train routes.

Gardner Mayor Stephen J. Erickson did know about it. And so did the Gardner City Council president. Ditto for Gardner L. Bent, one of that city's foremost furniture makers. They had asked, or had been offered the chance to ride on a Boston and Maine passenger tour and made the trip from Fitchburg to Mechanicsville, N.Y.

B&M, fighting federal railroad consolidation plans, arranged the special passenger car train to give interested officials a ride from Portland, Maine, to Mechanicsville. Stops along the way included places in New Hampshire and Massachusetts, including Fitchburg.

The railroad hopes to get public support for the B&M,

now in bankruptcy, but fighting for a chance to survive as an independent railway. The train people hope to show there is a need for rail freight service.

They succeeded, to a degree, at least.

The Gardner officials who rode the train were impressed that a need for freight service does exist. They told the B&M they will support the effort to keep the main freight line between Ayer and New York in service.

But they weren't alone. Fitchburg Mayor Headley Bray, who didn't take the train trip and says he didn't miss it, comments, "Trains are a coming thing." He said trains can provide a much needed source of ground transportation, a source America grew up with, then forgot, but now needs again.

"They didn't ask me and I didn't go," Bray said. "But I wouldn't have gone anyway. I know how bad the tracks are. I'd never go past Royalston on that train. I used to hunk up along those tracks and they

aren't safe." He said the tracks should be repaired, and the trains put to great use.

Erickson said the track bed was in "extremely good shape." He said rail service would be an "immense" value for north central Massachusetts.

Erickson also said he wants U.S. Sec. of Transportation Claude S. Brinegar and the Interstate Commerce Commission to reconsider any decision that would merge the B&M into a national or regional railroad system.

He said he was impressed with the rolling stock of the railroad, tracks, yards and equipment.

Nicholas Rudziak of the Gardner Chamber of Commerce, and a representative of the Montachusett Joint Transportation Committee, also took the train ride. He said a preliminary plan on railroad consolidation is being prepared, and includes plans for the B&M.

The B&M, meanwhile, is waiting for a ruling by Suffolk Court Judge Francis Murray about its bankruptcy case.