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Oregon Rail Heritage Foundation steams up to raise funds for Portland's historic locomotives

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Candice Ruud, The Oregonian



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Mark Kramer (left) and Ed Immel visit as the Oregon Rail Heritage Foundation preps one of Portland's steam-powered engines for passenger runs during the holiday season. The volunteers will begin to steam up the Southern Pacific #4449 next week.

Ed Immel has spent his adult life in the shadow of Portland's **three historic steam-powered locomotives**. He's at home in the drafty, oil-slicked **Brooklyn Roundhouse** where he hammers away on the engines' massive iron bodies all day.

The engines have been resting in that roundhouse -- Oregon's only remaining one -- for more than 25 years, while dedicated volunteers like Immel tinker and polish away. But in a little more than a year, the **Oregon Rail Heritage Foundation**, the engines' caretaker organization, loses its lease on the roundhouse.

And if it doesn't raise \$3.8 million to build a new facility by then, the engines might have no place to call home.

"We need to build the new building as soon as possible," said Immel, the foundation's vice president. "This is a critical year for us; we've had to get serious about it."

The group has gotten rolling. It has \$1.5 million so far, and opportunities to make money are coming up. Early next week, the volunteers start to steam up one of the engines, the **Southern Pacific #4449**, for the sixth annual **Holiday Express**, a major holiday-themed fundraiser that pulls in about \$40,000 every year.

As one of the engines that pulled the **Bicentennial Freedom Train** throughout the

Holiday Express

What: 45-minute holiday-themed tours on a short rail line, pulled by engine SP #4449. Santa Claus will be aboard, so bring your Christmas wish lists. Holiday Express is a

nation from 1975 to 1977, #4449 is an American icon. And Immel and Doyle McCormack, a veteran railroader and the foundation's president, are vital to its history. The two men met in the early 1970s to prepare the engine for its historic tour, and both went along for the ride.

"It was like being part of a circus," McCormack said of the 126-city tour. "You'd wake up in a different city every other day.

"This is a disease you catch," he added. "And once you catch it, it's incurable."

Usually, the **Spokane, Portland and Seattle Railway #700** engine accompanies #4449 on the Holiday Express tour. The two help earn money for their future digs by leading teams of vintage rail cars on the holiday-themed tours, rumbling through the **Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge** and Springwater Trail. This year's Holiday Express tours run from Dec. 3-5 and Dec. 10-12, but #4449 is going solo.

"The 700 is getting work done on it this year, but since we've run the Holiday Express it's been both engines," Immel said.

In the past, the first weekend of the express has been slow. The foundation hopes to jumpstart attendance this year with increased advertising and sponsorship.

"Lord willing, the creek don't rise, we'll raise the money," McCormack said.

With help from the city of Portland, the foundation purchased property last year near the **Oregon Museum of Science and Industry** in Southeast Portland. The vision for the project is an interactive museum where people can come see and touch the engines Immel and fellow volunteers have labored over for so long.

Despite the estimated 100 volunteer hours that go into every hour the engines actually run, Immel said it's a love-hate relationship.

"These engines, they just laugh at us," said Immel, who before retiring was a state rail planner for Oregon. Now, he spends all his free time with the three giants: #4449, built in 1941; #700, built in 1938, and the **Oregon Railroad & Navigation Railway #197**, built in 1905.

Since their Freedom Train tour, McCormack and Immel, both 67, have spent their energy coaxing the engines back to life after long dormant periods.

fundraiser to build a new facility for Portland's three antique steam engines.

When: Dec. 3-5 and 10-12

Where: Oaks Park Station

How much: Adult: \$16

Child: \$10 (ages 3 thru 12)

Family pack: \$45 (two adults and two children)

Family of five: \$45 (two adults and three children on Fridays only)

Groups of 15 or more: \$12 per person

Tickets: Available at ticketswest.com or by calling 503-224-8499

Website:
Oregon Rail Heritage Foundation



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Mark Kramer works on the air pump system of Southern Pacific #4449, one of the locomotives that the Oregon Rail Heritage Foundation uses to pull the Holiday Express train. Kramer is president of the Friends of SP #4449, a group that takes care of the historic steam engine.

"#4449 is a typical female," said McCormack, a member of the Friends of SP #4449, the group that cares specifically for that engine. "You know why they call them 'she'? They're beautiful, graceful and a lot of fun, but if you don't treat 'em right, you'll be sorry."

The veteran volunteers live for the awe on people's faces when they come to the Holiday Express and for the first time see steam billowing from the top of the 17-foot-tall engines, decked out in Christmas lights.

"When little kids come up with their big eyes looking up at this big engine, it pays the bill," said Mark Kramer, 59, president of the Friends of SP #4449.

Immel and McCormack said they want to recruit a younger generation of enthusiasts to care for the giant, iron antiques when they no longer can.

"How do you stay young? Hammer on steam engines!" Immel said. "Except it gets harder now to climb up the ladder and climb down under the trains."

"We try to encourage young people, but most of them today just want to play video games," McCormack said. "And once they discover girls, that's the last we see of them."

They typically don't encourage minors to volunteer because of liability reasons, but McCormack said he has a 16-year-old volunteer who "really has a passion for it -- not just a fleeting interest."

"We never saw these engines in regular service," Immel said. "It's a skill that's been passed down person to person. We're trying to re-create the 'wow' of it."

-- **Candice Ruud**

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