

WINTER PARK EXPRESS

HOW THE SKI TRAIN GOT BACK ON TRACK

BY JOHN GARVEY

It was just one week into 2017, and already a happy crowd of Colorado snow-goers was celebrating the high point of the entire year: the triumphant return of the 56-mile passenger ski train from Denver to Winter Park.

Now improved and rebranded as the Winter Park Express, the ski train was mourned when it closed in 2009 after Union Station's extensive redevelopment rendered it impractical as a rail transportation hub. And it's no wonder the train was missed: Those headed for the slopes can waste half the day along the great car accordion known as I-70.

Now, at least for Winter Park, there's a railroad less traveled.

GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY SPARKS ACTION

In September 2014, a short editorial on page seven of the Colorado Rail Passengers Association (ColoRail) newsletter sparked the ski train service's eventual re-opening. ColoRail board member Bob Brewster wrote that Union Station's remodel had been completed, the infrastructure was already in place, it would be a boon to the hospitality and tourism industry, and "it could be the easiest, fastest, and least expensive [rail] service to inaugurate" overall.

"I honestly didn't think it would do anything other than just fill in some space in our newsletter and indicate to people what we had in mind by starting something small and affordable and doable," says Brewster, a longtime RTD employee.

Galvanized by Brewster's editorial, Amtrak Conductor Brad Swartzwelter drafted a business plan, which ColoRail submitted to Amtrak.

"Bob provided the spark, Brad provided the plan, along with [Winter Park Resorts

CEO Gary DeFrange], then Gary carried the load," ColoRail President Jim Souby says. "He convened these meetings and was the numero uno guy up at Winter Park meeting with Amtrak and Union Pacific."

"STRANGE BEDFELLOWS"

Although most of the needed infrastructure already existed, it would be wrong to view re-launching the ski train as a sure thing.

Two behemoth organizations — Union

Pacific and Amtrak — a ski resort, CDOT, RTD, the city of Denver and the town of Winter Park had to get on the same page for WPE to happen. It received strong bipartisan political support and corporate sponsorship to boot. Without broad agreement about the service's merits, it would have failed, say those involved.

"The fact that all those disparate entities came together is amazing, but the fact that they came together so quickly is just unheard of and unbelievable," Winter Park spokesman Steve Hurlburt says.

Last year, Winter Park Resort applied for and received a \$1.5 million CDOT grant to help build a \$3.1 million ADA-compliant rail platform. The grant process, usually requiring about a year, was completed in four months. Construction commenced promptly.

NUTS, BOLTS AND PIPES

The ski train experience is unique in that it eliminates the need for additional

SKI TRAIN BY-THE-NUMBERS

25

NUMBER OF TRIPS MADE IN FIRST SEASON

18,000

TOTAL FIRST-SEASON PASSENGERS

56

MILES ON ROUTE FROM UNION STATION TO WINTER PARK

\$78

COST OF CHEAPEST ROUND-TRIP TICKET

31

TOTAL FIRST-SEASON PASSENGERS

510

NUMBER OF TUNNELS START TO FINISH

transportation, arriving directly at the base of the ski area. With the recent completion of the A line from the airport to Union Station, travelers can get from their city of origin to the slopes without taking a single shuttle or car.

Brewster, who has taken the WPE more than a half dozen times this year, described each trip as having an aura of celebration.

"The passengers are incredibly happy with this service," he says.

And not all of them are heading to the slopes.

"Around 30 percent of all the people taking the train are not skiers," Hurlburt says. The town has seen increased hotel bookings in part because unlike previous iterations, the WPE offers one-way ticketing, facilitating overnight stays.

The issue of accessibility is a cultural imperative for Winter Park as the host of the National Sports Center for the Disabled. "The ADA compliance is something you have to do," Hurlburt



| THE SKI TRAIN ROUNDS THE BEND INTO WINTER PARK, WHERE IT DROPS OFF SKIERS DIRECTLY AT THE BASE OF THE MOUNTAIN.

says, "but for us it's a little bit different because it's so much a part of who we are."

"This is not simply recreation, it is accessibility for people who have not been able to travel," Amtrak spokesman Marc Magliari says.

COASTING ONWARD

The next three years will see relatively minor, incremental changes. Orders for new railcars are backlogged nationally, so a strong logistical and financial case must be made to add equipment for additional time.

"There's not a big pile of railcars out there waiting for assignment," Magliari says.

ColoRail and Amtrak hope Winter Park Express is a springboard for something even greater.

"From ColoRail's perspective as advocates, we see the ski train as definitely amplifying the public's interest in having a passenger rail service," Souby says. "And the most likely place to run that service, obviously in this state right now, is up and down the Front Range, connecting all of our employment centers and communities and all the rest." **ca**